

OLIVER OSBORNE

European Paintings

11/09/16- 20/10/16

PELES EMPIRE
Karl-Marx-Straße 58 (HH)
12043 Berlin

Peles Empire

Oliver Osborne
European Paintings
10.09.16 - 20.10.16

Clockwise from entrance:



Oil on linen
32 x 24 cm
2016

>

Embroidered linen
214 x 164 cm
2016

Untitled
Embroidered linen
189 x 129 cm
2016

Rubber Plant
Oil on linen
34 x 26 cm
2016

<

Embroidered linen
214 x 164 cm
2016

Untitled
Embroidered linen
161 x 156 cm
2016

The following text is included in *Oliver Osborne European Paintings*, published in May 2016 by Mousse Publishing, Milan with generous support from Vilma Gold, London, Gió Marconi, Milan and Catherine Bastide, Brussels.

The Choice Choice

Terry R. Myers

The beholder must use on the painting such visual skills as he has, very few of which are normally special to painting, and he is likely to use those skills his society esteems highly. The painter responds to this; his public's visual capacity must be his medium. Whatever his own specialised professional skills, he is himself a member of the society he works for and shares its visual experience and habit.

—Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*¹

Oliver Osborne is not the first painter to make pretty choice paintings that are about choice, or, better yet, about *doing* something about choice itself: something critical yet open, timely yet mindful of history. The categories in which his paintings could be situated remain well-placed themselves not because they have been kept in their place as dogma but rather because many artists – sharing, as Michael Baxandall says above, their society's 'visual experience and habit' – have worked hard to resist those aspects of choice that have too often and too easily become limiting, if not exclusionary and reactionary. Abstract, representational, high, low, painting, picture, even colour and line are less likely than maybe ever to fit into any construct of either/or. Not that long ago any hint of such a resistance to definition was usually taken as evidence of a lack of commitment or conviction, a verdict rendered more often than not on the basis of modernist doctrine.

Now, of course, new painters are emerging after postmodernism has moved from theory to doctrine itself, and, to my eyes (and ears), it's clear that another paradigm is emerging, one that pushes against not only the either/or but also any continuation of the 'death of painting' narrative. It seems to me that that story now seems to many of these emerging painters as having been exhausted by those of us who lived through a parent-child relationship with both modernism and postmodernism that was (and may still be) ambivalent. There have been, fortunately, some agile and reliable 'runaways' such as Laura Owens, who, as demonstrated in a recent interview, is very much on *point* about what the death of painting wasn't able to extinguish: 'painting *does things*, and why wouldn't you use all the things it does?'² This is the attitude adjustment that emerging painters such as Oliver Osborne have taken on and then intensified to up their game. Well versed in crucial aspects of image culture (its production and analysis), and with an anything-but-lacking desire for the material conditions of making and, yes, the dexterity of both hand and brain, Osborne has already established in his work that the long-standing ways and means of painting (long, long before modernism) are not all that played out after all.

Osborne's deft and repeated use of the tropes of the monochrome and the cartoon suggests the work of Ad Reinhardt as an appropriately fixed yet tetchy historical pin in the map of the territory that Osborne is surveying, excavating, complicating, and reclaiming. (Richard Prince is all over Osborne's map, and I'll deal with him later.) In 1943 Reinhardt wrote a lecture called 'Painting and Pictures'. In it he argued that it was the arrival of abstraction at the end of the nineteenth century that enabled painting to be nothing but painting, sweeping everything from the Renaissance to modernism to make this proclamation: 'Painting which functioned as a picture prevented people from seeing its basic

meanings and reduced painting eventually to a wall decoration.³ With the arrival of abstract painting, painting 'became a new object . . . made by a researcher, an "artist's artist" . . . [who] studied what the elements of painting "meant" by themselves, what they did once in pictures, what they could say out of pictures'.

So, then, if painting could just be painting, Reinhardt concluded that pictures could be just pictures, hence, 'Illustration, poster-making, applied art, freed from "fine-art" elaborations, fulfilled their functions more clearly and honestly.' Seeking clarity and honesty, Reinhardt would go on to develop his infamous and picture-free black square paintings, all the while continuing to produce his editorial cartoons that usually skewered artists and the art world, maintaining an either/or-ness in his overall production that remained potent and continues to speak volumes, despite all of the attempts to proclaim his black paintings as last paintings.

By combining monochrome painting and cartoon illustration, much of Osborne's work, at first glance, seems to be a simple rejection of the split between Reinhardt's paintings and cartoons as well as an assertion of the current state of the painting-versus-picture argument. Take for example an early example such as *Oh! Ich muss einkaufen. Kannst du mir helfen?* (2013). Two vertical canvases, rectangles, have been brought together to make a large and just slightly more horizontal diptych. The left has been painted a somewhat mottled light olive green, the right an absorbent, not reflective, white. On the green panel, Osborne has adhered a copy of an illustration that seems to have been taken from a beginner's textbook for learning an unfamiliar language, its text now also serving as the title of the painting.

One thing the text isn't is a joke: 'Oh! I need to go shopping. Can you help me?' Ever so slightly humorous, made more so by its accompanying depiction of an open, empty refrigerator (complete with those 'action' lines drawn around comic book characters to indicate motion – 'is your refrigerator running?'), it somehow managed to gain poignancy as Osborne has re-placed it into what we can think of as the 'suspended animation' of painting. Because of the clear care with which this painting has been painted, it and Osborne's work overall can be situated in an ambitious if not aspirational trajectory from Reinhardt (as opposed to Barnett Newman, who didn't care as much about how his paintings were made) to Ellsworth Kelly and Gerhard Richter. As for postmodernism, even though at first glance these particular paintings of Osborne's resemble Richard Prince's joke paintings, I think the more compelling connection is with the work of Sherrie Levine, particularly her 'checkerboard' paintings. As appropriations of abstraction as a *category* while also alluding to the endgame of chess and, by extension, painting in the 1980s, Levine's paintings play with the terms and conditions of modernism as a critique but not as ridicule.⁴ (The fact that they are impeccably made is key, or better yet is *the* key.) The same can be said about Osborne's investigations of postmodernism as well as modernism across the range of his work.

Over the past few years Osborne has explored the territory of his monochrome/cartoon paintings with a sharp eye for variety. By now we should realise that this is no accident. *Le poisson et le fromage* (2014), for example, is one of several paintings made of a single panel (light grey) with a single picture (on bright yellow) well-placed in its lower centre, even if the picture itself is a chart (the grid, of course) of nine drawn images of objects with accompanying text in French. Other paintings, such as *Green (Where are you comfortable, Martin Graz?)* (2013) incorporate a cartoon image that has been split vertically and positioned out of order against the left and right framing edge of the canvas, as if each actual edge were instead a virtual continuation of the other. Here, as everywhere in Osborne's work, the choice is to be heterogeneous in terms of the physical and material structures of painting in order to reinforce that any boundary between painting and picture, or, for that matter, one language or another (verbal and/or visual), only works when it allows for and even encourages agility: incorporating both sides of Reinhardt without capitulation, reaffirming while repositioning Kelly's commitment to the painting as a specific object on a wall, and renegotiating Richter's desire 'to bring together the most disparate and mutually contradictory elements, alive and viable, in the greatest possible freedom'.⁵

It's a little bit funny that it is an image of a rubber plant that figures prominently on the 'other side' of Osborne's output. Paintings such as *Rubber Plant (Flight)* and *Rubber Plant (Bar)* (both 2013) provide readily identified material and conceptual connections to the

monochrome/cartoon paintings (they are, to be clear, significantly smaller) with what read as more incongruous illustrative images set upon a meticulously rendered image of a plant that may or may not be 'real': a bird in flight after escaping a cage, and a man walking into a bar. (By the way, Osborne often makes it incredibly tempting to take the bait and read all sorts of things into these images, especially things related to current attitudes about painting, but the paintings themselves are so capable of resisting such an easy way out that they never waver in their challenge to us to do the same.) The *Rubber Plant* paintings from 2013 to 2015 obviously (I'm tempted to say blatantly) do away with the collaged illustrative image, grounded instead by a depiction that is well painted and unapologetic about it. Not that long ago I may have concluded that there had to be a certain level of defensiveness required to make such skilled paintings. Instead I am convinced that the inclusiveness of Osborne's criticality facilitates their production, helped with my assessment by a recent interview with Osborne in which he defined the 'recent history' of painting as 'from Ingres to [Michael] Krebber perhaps'.⁶

So why not use all the things painting does? *Untitled (Pot)*, *Untitled*, and *Pot (The Call)* (all 2015) are small paintings that picture small containers made of ceramic: a material that is as ubiquitous and never-ending in cultural terms (form/function, high/low, art/craft) as you can get. (*Pot (The Call)* depicts its jar resting on what looks to be a canvas-turned-tabletop with a fragment of an enlarged cartoon image, providing another layer to the interwoven complexities of Osborne's work.) They are timely and timeless all at once, sharing the unusual calm of their incongruity with the last body of work that I will include here, equally skilful paintings of a female torso depicted while pregnant. Two of these paintings have titles that read as clues: *Fāgāras/Berlin* and *30.12* (both 2015), suggesting that they are especially personal for the artist as evidence of the future birth of his child. I don't think knowing this should matter that much (or maybe it means *everything*), but it is profound that these are the paintings that most explicitly represent certain moments in time while making the paintings themselves timeless and very much choice.

Notes

1. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 40.
2. "Optical Drive: Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer Talks with Laura Owens," *Artforum* 51, no. 7 (March 2013): 232.
3. Ad Reinhardt, "Painting and Pictures" (1943), in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 118–20.
4. Levine also made several *Krazy Kat* paintings in the 1980s, after images from George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* dating from 1913–14.
5. Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh" (1985), in *Gerhard Richter, The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962–1993*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (London: Anthony d'Offay / Thames & Hudson; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 161–66.
6. Oliver Osborne, interview with Guido Santandrea, "Oliver Osborne and the Visual Communication," *Arte e Critica*, no. 77 (Winter 2014): 57.

