

seems a formula but is never exactly repeated. All this is a delight for lovers of abstract painting, and even those who doubt the value of trying to move higher on its well-trodden slopes—Sisyphus, hero or schmuck? as a friend of mine puts it—may find in Whitney someone to convince them.

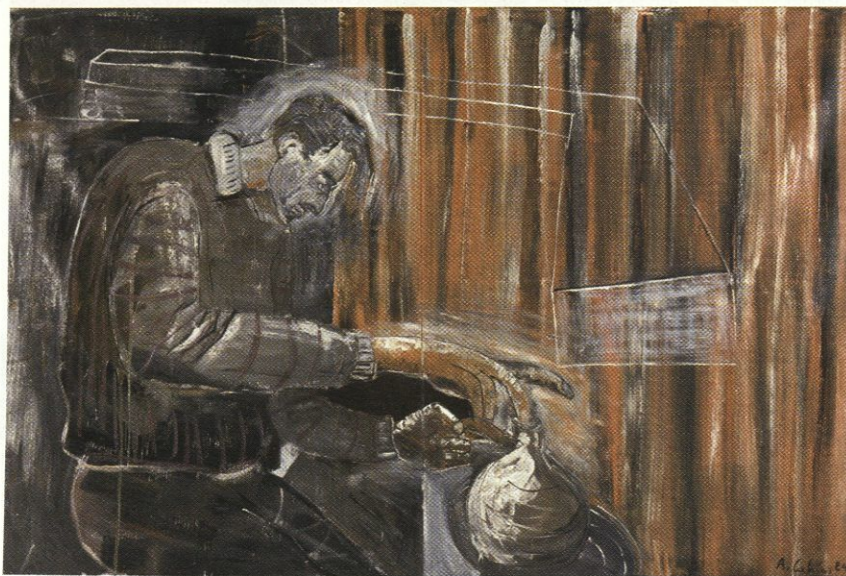
—David Frankel

Albert Oehlen

NEW MUSEUM

The works in “Home and Garden,” the first major retrospective of Albert Oehlen’s work in New York, explore separate but parallel universes—representation and abstraction, manual dexterity and pixelated matrix—and commonly bring both together at once. Oehlen is a skilled painter, despite the sensation of glum helplessness his work often evokes, an emotional tenor fortuitously coincidental with (and generative of) our moment in art history when the “de-skilling” of painting passes for fiat: Expressionism as “inexpressionist painting . . . a pretext for an analysis of the act of painting than as painting itself—the picturing of a picture. . . ,” as Massimiliano Gioni (who headed the show’s brilliant curatorial team) neatly puts it. Or, to say it another way, this show celebrated “a grammar of expressionism” ultimately deflating into the blur of modish inexpression.

Painting as a mirror of nature—gone. Its replacement? Virtuosity capsized by Surrealist automatism, or Abstract Expressionism drained of felt necessity, or abject, farcical Cubism, all leading to the wiping away of image (the sign of frustrated anger), even as the blur embodies the most up-to-date lassitude—boredom as an exercise in spectacle. Following World War I, Expressionism epitomized progressive German art. Then came the brownshirts and, amid the smoldering ash of Hitler’s



Albert Oehlen, *Selbstportrait mit Einlochtopf* (Self-Portrait with One-Hole Vase), 1984, oil on canvas, 67 x 102 1/2”.

Third Reich, an official abstraction (Fritz Winter, Ernst Wilhelm Nay) arose endorsed by western-zone taste, the reversing mirror of the eastern zone’s socialist realism. Finally, during the 1960s, Joseph Beuys (the alpha) reunited the “economic miracle” of Germany with its tattered past. Beuys’s student Sigmar Polke (the omega) lent giant credence to the emerging work of a yet younger generation—that of Martin Kippenberger, particularly, whose work shares inescapable points of similarity to that of Oehlen.

“Home and Garden” assembled some twenty-seven large works from the 1980s up through more or less the present day. Oehlen’s default mode has been a black-and-white figuration that layers seemingly errant motions with superposed digital bits and pieces. Such works, while pleasing, also register Oehlen’s dissatisfaction with direct representation. Studying *Selbstportrait mit Einlochtopf* (Self-Portrait with One-Hole Vase), 1984, for example, we note that the figure’s proportions are “off”—well, who cares about that? And of course, the color is way too murky—unsurprising, given that the artist’s lack of intuitive chromatic agility. (In fact, this is a hallmark of his “bad painting,” the rubric under which this work came to be known, indeed celebrated.)

But beyond these “demerits,” *Self-Portrait with One-Hole Vase* is vexing because it is left incomplete, implying the tedium inherent in actually finishing the damn thing. Perhaps the act of completion is ruled out by the sheer antagonisms built into Oehlen’s enterprise—his efforts to reconcile the ostensibly irreconcilable. Over time, as we approach the present moment, Oehlen defaults to the swank smear and hapless blur.

But there is an additional twist: As the tropes that spawned Oehlen’s decades-long disaffections are ultimately upended, they become, in their inverse correlation, the very heart of his oddball practice. What is surpassingly strange is that the loss of painting as an aesthetic act has become the status quo of contemporary painting itself, a perfect art for our era of disinformation. What hitherto would have been discounted, not to say shunned, becomes the new official model, the new New, a paradox I understand well, having greatly endorsed it in a lifetime of criticism. But here, in examining some three decades of Oehlen’s work, we see that his destruction of representation in particular continues to carry force: We are still surprised and horrified at the same instant. As Gioni astutely grasps: “[E]verything is real just as long as everything is in a picture.”

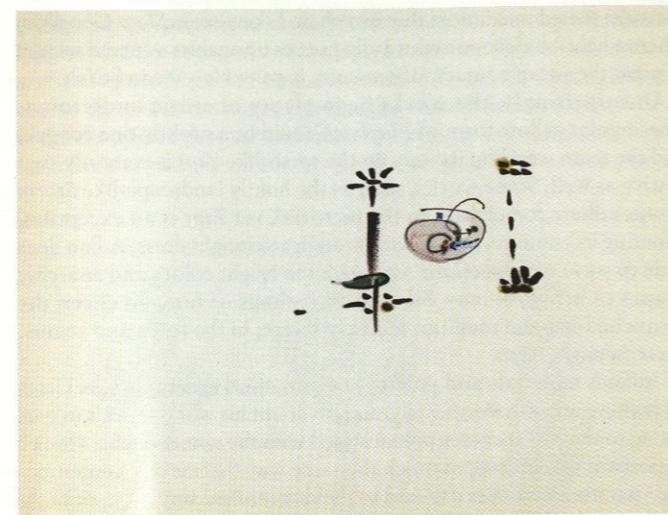
—Robert Pincus-Witten

Gordon Matta-Clark

DAVID ZWIRNER

Gordon Matta-Clark was as accomplished at making drawings with pencils, pens, markers, and crayons as he was at cutting into abandoned warehouses, suburban homes, and dilapidated tenement buildings with a chain saw. And these drawings offer a variety of insights into the American-born artist’s attitudes about nature, movement, and geometry; the themes that interested him; and the times in which he lived. Several dozen works on paper executed between 1969 and 1977, the year before Matta-Clark died of cancer at the age of thirty-five, were recently on view at David Zwirner.

It’s surprising to discover that Matta-Clark, during a period when so many artists were preoccupied with abstraction, from Minimalist structures to Color Field painting, drew trees. But these works weren’t landscape painting: Matta-Clark studied architecture at Cornell during the 1960s, and for him, trees could serve as shelters and even places to hold dance events, such as one he performed at Vassar College in 1971. Shortly after Earth Day was launched but years before climate change became a matter of global concern, Matta-Clark was calling attention to nature’s cycles, to growth and movement. The artist’s so-called Energy Trees also establish his credentials as a visionary. In these, delicate lines and seasonal colors play off one another. Instead of the constellatory space associated with the paintings of his father, Surrealist Roberto Matta, you’re in an imaginary world where trees bend, curve, wrap around one another, even embrace. The swift lines



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Untitled (Energy Rooms)*, 1974, ink and marker on paper, 7 1/2 x 11”.

you find here are further exaggerated and activated in the series of works known collectively as Arrows. Here the marks are practically choreographed.

Matta-Clark attended college when Skinner boxes, introduced by B. F. Skinner, a behavioral psychologist who taught at Harvard, were a hot topic. The studies for Matta-Clark’s Energy Rooms that filled a notebook presented here seemed to represent a cross between these sorts of boxes as a living space and the type of artist’s studio that resembles an artwork—Piet Mondrian’s atelier in New York City, say. Though these sketches are small and were hastily done and roughly drawn, they suggest images that could have been realized on a large scale with few but emphatic colors.

The notebook studies for Matta-Clark’s Cut Drawings were the icing on the cake, as were the six Cut Drawings on view. The twenty-nine sheets presented all sorts of shapes and forms executed rapidly with pencil and marker—the speed of their execution seeming the very opposite of how the cuts in buildings actually were executed. The six Cut Drawings made from cardboard topped with gesso or stucco and thick piles of paper evinced a more careful, deliberate Matta-Clark at work. Their geometric character and the thickness of the cuts offered a vivid reminder of how spellbinding his incursions into architecture must have been.

In the catalogue for Matta-Clark’s 1985 retrospective, painter Mary Heilmann recalls how he “would work in a state of frenzy” when he was drawing. That’s a quality that certainly was communicated in this show. You can picture, as Heilmann describes it, that way that Matta-Clark would “take colored pencils, dig in, press hard and fast, and scribble along.” We could not be more fortunate that he took us along for the ride.

—Phyllis Tuchman

Raymond Roussel

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ

Difficult author; reclusive aesthete; visionary fabricator of fantastic objects literary, conceptual, and material: The reputation of Raymond Roussel (1877–1933) often precedes him. In photographs he is a pale, impeccably groomed man with a resplendent mustache. A shy smile pairs oddly with the wild energy in his gaze. His writings, allegedly incomprehensible to all but the most committed appreciators of his day, still receive less attention than his biography or, perhaps more accurately, his *legend*.

Galerie Buchholz’s recent exhibition was the latest view into the Roussel annals. It also functioned as a housewarming: Heretofore exclusively a Berlin concern, Buchholz now has a foothold near the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Behind the robust facade of a town house of the sort normally occupied by foreign embassies, Buchholz’s three-room offering of Roussellania was an extremely welcome addition to the neighborhood and felt, more generally, like a happy return to a fan favorite. Roussel’s work never gets old—partly because of how strange it is and partly because so few people have actually read it.

Roussel wrote long, formally and conceptually complex poems, as well as novels. He is best known for 1910’s *Impressions of Africa*, a novel that he published at his own expense and later mounted as an elaborately costumed play. The structure of the novel is famously based on the punning difference between two otherwise identical, seemingly insignificant phrases: *les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard* (the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table) and *les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard* (the letters of a white man about the bands of the old pillager). Beginning with the first of these two arbitrary images, Roussel concludes twenty-six chapters later with the second; in the pages between, he describes the court of an imaginary African king at which, in a fantasy of colonialism reversed, a troupe of European entertainers are detained and forced to enact various impossible tableaux.

Like the prose of Marcel Proust, Roussel’s oeuvre marks the encounter of Victorian representational styles and ideas about time with those that would come to characterize modernism. Unlike the prose of Marcel Proust, Roussel’s writings are not concerned with phenomenal reality. Instead, Roussel wanted his readers to consider unreal visions *already* mediated by writing or other technologies, not experiences but rather images of experience; he was a practitioner par excellence of the trope of ekphrasis, or description of another work of art in writing. In *Impressions of Africa*, in what amounts to a displacement of lived time by performances and scientific experiments, unusual devices give rise to new images and texts. There are light-projecting plants; a glass-enclosed mechanical orchestra powered by the thermal sensitivity of “bexium,” an imaginary metal; a photomechanical painting machine. These “*machines correspondantes*,” as Gilles Deleuze called them, have the additional effect of rendering ornament essential rather than “removable,” as in Walter Pater’s formulation. For Pater—whose emphasis on stylistic economy was influential for modernists from

View of “Raymond Roussel,” 2015.



Proust to Ezra Pound—the “surplusage” of decorative language diminishes meaning. Pater’s rules are passionately flouted by Roussel, whose nearly nonsensical ekphrastic delays, or stoppages, produce exciting excursions into speculative artistic and scientific practice.

Buchholz helpfully parsed Roussel’s relationship to Proust by means of the inclusion of two editions of Proust’s prose-poem collection *Les plaisirs et les jours* (Pleasures and Days), published in 1896, the year before the appearance of Roussel’s first novel-in-verse, *La doublure* (The Understudy). Even more startling and immediate were enlargements of a series of Roussel family snapshots, some taken by Raymond, including a close-up of Madame Roussel and a pet dog with eyes that appear to be made of glass. Here we glimpsed a largely unknown corner of the archive.

Yet far more space in this modest gallery was devoted to the better-known reception history: Roussel’s influence on artists from Marcel Duchamp (who attended a performance of *Impressions of Africa*) to Joseph Cornell to Marcel Broodthaers; his connection to Surrealism; the American poet John Ashbery’s oft-cited importation of Roussel’s work into American English; Michel Foucault’s early monograph. Such diverse adulation for the show’s subject was reassuring, but the sheer quantity of materials that were included in the exhibition, along with recent works by Cameron Rowland and Henrik Olesen, among others, felt a bit like a missed opportunity. Though for Roussel more was always more, he always advanced via carefully designed procedures. More and more we want narrative and arrangement, space to think about the overwhelming amounts of information we receive; it might have been nice to consider the ways in which Roussel’s miraculous inventions anticipated this desire.

—Lucy Ives

Justin Adian SKARSTEDT

Justin Adian’s show “Fort Worth” presented sixteen works that were made using a technique he has employed since 2007, and that has come to be his signature and calling card: The artist places hunks of foam on shaped wooden stretchers, stretches canvas over the foam, and applies oil enamel paint to the canvas surface. The results—puffy, shiny, asymmetrical—have a crisp, graphic appeal. They stand out from the wall with pleasing aplomb, like pop-surrealist upholstery, or comics come to life.

They are also possessed of a zany, cartoonlike expressivity; Adian can coax quite a bit of energy from relatively simple means. His cushions are best at capturing a sense of weight and mass: All but one work here consisted of at least two separately wrapped foam pieces pressed against one another, and there is something expressly relatable, even satisfying, about the way the pieces smooch together. This sense is strongest when the pieces don’t meet each other perfectly. In *Outfeel* (all works 2015), for example, the folds of the canvas bring to mind

buttocks seated uncomfortably in a chair. Likewise, in *Slow Goodbye*, where a light-blue shape awkwardly presses up against a curved section of pink, the site of contact, of pressure, is palpable—it can be felt.

Unsurprisingly, the works have plenty of erotic undertones. The angular yellow form of *Playback* could be a necktie or a tongue, and the seam wending its way up the torso-like *Zipt* is certainly suggestive as well. Some works, such as the hokily landscape-like *Storm Front*, adhere too closely to the pictorial, yet *Zipt* is an exception, flaunting its contours like curves through a skintight dress. Adian does little to stave off abjection: Although the bright colors and anarchic shapes of his work may fill us with feelings of fun and cheer, the scrunched-enamel medium is sickly sweet; in the folds and seams, bacteria might teem.

Adian’s materials and palette bring to mind artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Ellsworth Kelly, and no doubt his work appeals in part owing to the way it comes prepackaged with the unmistakable “look” of postwar art. Indeed, in much the same way that certain contemporary-painting practices are said to yield zombified simulacra of high-modernist formalism, Adian might be charged with plundering what came next: the shaped canvases and “specific objects” of the 1960s. Is it painting or is it sculpture? That such a question could be unanswerable was once a really big deal; quite incredibly, in 2015, it still gets invoked in reference to Adian’s work.

Which is fine: An object need only be interesting, and Adian’s work doesn’t require the aura of long-bygone provocations to sustain its charge. In fact, if he evokes the ’60s, perhaps the proper antecedent is not Kelly et al., but the loosely defined category of “Pop abstraction,” which includes figures such as Raymond Hendler and Nicholas Krushenick (and, later, Jonathan Lasker), who sublimated AbEx viscerality in the cartoonish graphic shorthand of mass culture. (The figurative grotesqueries of the Hairy Who seem relevant as well.) Resurrected here, the style feels contemporary enough: Adian’s plump, priapic part-objects may invoke the body, but it’s one that’s wrapped in synthetic fabric and bulging at the seams, a body designed only to consume and be consumed.

—Lloyd Wise

Rita McBride

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

Rita McBride’s recent exhibition “Access” displayed a number of new sculptures in the shape of keys, keyholes, knockers, and locks, as well as a variety of large metal sheets out of which at least some of the works in the show had been cut. McBride individually designed each work on a computer and then sent her drawings out to a shop where they were sliced out of a variety of metals. The surprise is that the results do not betray the somewhat high-tech process by which these works were made. Rather, they look crude and basic, almost handmade and certainly aged, their various edges displaying inconsistencies and aberrations. This effect is due in large part to the fact that McBride patinated her objects much as a forger would age a coin, applying chemicals and treatments so as to transform them into real fakes, things both weighty and brittle, inelegant with sharp edges. For all their folkish associations, however, there was something slightly off about these works—shifted out of scale, they hovered somewhere between actual objects and their flattened silhouettes. Various hung alone, as well as in collections, they felt familiar and decorative, like things brought together through obsession rather than curatorial cleverness.

There might be a precedent to McBride’s work in some of Allan McCollum’s endless series of sculptures, but her pieces resonated in

other, and, I would argue, more profound ways. In an age vaunted for both the facility of access and the integrity of firewalls—think not only of the ubiquity of the key card, the password, and the thumbprint, but also of the words *invalid* and *protected*—McBride’s work reminds us of different histories and traditions of entering: knocking on a neighbor’s door or picking a lock. That most of these works recall the ver-



Rita McBride, *Middle East*, 2015, waterjet-cut brass plate with silver nitrate patina and Renaissance wax, three parts, overall 20 ½ × 29 × ¼”.

nacular language of some territory or nation-state simultaneously conjured the traditions of place as well as the harsh reality of the world’s ever more stringently policed borders. A set of three silver keys designated *Middle East* (all works 2015) were dressed in silver nitrate patina, while a set of four brass plates scumbled in Renaissance wax were identified as *Ontario*. Four copper cutouts depicting door knockers comprised *Eastern Europe* and three oversize locks bore the weight of the name *Central Africa*. The almost museological diversity of the world look different (though not in a glib, *National Geographic* sort of way), while also bringing home the point that not all parts of the globe are easily accessible, that we are not free to knock anywhere we like. (One felt this again after stepping out the gallery door and gazing up at the high walls of brushed-steel-and-glass condos.)

If these works trade in a certain kind of resistance, then, it is tied to their emphasis on the decorative, which has the effect of linking them to a time both before and different from our own. The simultaneous simplicity and profundity of these works remind one that art today need not stage spectacles, or trade in irony, in order to enter into a dialogue with the contemporary moment. Indeed, it was refreshing to see a show in which no laser or 3-D printers had been damaged, nothing had been purchased off eBay, and not one object had been crafted from spirulina. To reflect profoundly on the contemporary might mean to pull back on it, and make it drag.

Throughout my time at the exhibition, I was reminded of the idiosyncratic installation of art and artifacts at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. A disciple of John Dewey’s pragmatism, Dr. Albert Barnes installed his great collection of Picassos and Cézannes amid a swirling array of hardware, including locks and handles, which punctuate the space between the paintings and subject them to new readings. Barnes’s hanging is so distinct and idiosyncratic, in fact, that one cannot help but read it as a kind of philosophy, the metal handles inviting you to open doors of perception. The criticality of McBride’s gesture seems to lie in the suggestion that we have reached an inverse state today. In a world in which the most important types of access often seem locked and foreclosed, one must be on the lookout for other ways of opening things up.

—Alex Kitnick

Ulrich Rückriem

KOENIG & CLINTON

For his first solo exhibition in New York in almost twenty years, Ulrich Rückriem quietly confounded the expectations of those familiar with his monumental sculptures. After all, it would not have been unreasonable to expect a spectacle like the one Michael Heizer presented at Gagosian earlier this year, that of an aging artist (now in his late seventies, Rückriem has been working consistently since the early 1960s) going bigger and brasher than ever before. But though Rückriem, like Heizer, is known for massive stone blocks, permutative methods, and an uncompromising, even contrarian personality that has perhaps impeded the institutional recognition his work warrants, he has proven that his impulse to create is radically different than that of his fellow Earth artist. The centerpiece of the exhibition, *The Last Fifty Years*, 2015, is a single work composed of seven individual sculptures, each a diminutive version of his standard materials, processes, and tools: There are timber beams placed perpendicularly, rows of steel rebar with their edges neatly wound, stone plates that have been polished to varying degrees of luster, and an iron pipe hammered flat. They are flinty and implacable and resolutely beautiful in their simplicity.

This impeccable arrangement of sculptures was echoed by a suite of forty-nine drawings Rückriem produced for the show. These modest works (only 8 by 11 ¼ inches each) were hung in two grids—one with four rows of seven, the other with three—that were installed on opposing walls, preventing the viewer from taking them all in at once. For each, Rückriem started with seven points, then joined the lines in a number of different ways, shading in various shapes that arose. One row in particular was remarkable for its elegance and its welcome confirmation that permutation can still be surprising. Here, the same pattern of holes, like the points of a constellation, had been punched in seven pieces of matte-black Dibond. Each was hung from a different opening so that the paper draped in different ways, the only moment of irregularity in the show. The pierced pages call to mind the holes in Rückriem’s stone monoliths left by the rotary hammer saws used to cut the rock at the quarry, but they also evoke the pinhole projectors children make to look at a solar eclipse.

The main component of *The Last Fifty Years*—placed literally in the center of the gallery—is an iron ring that does not quite close, with a small gap where the final weld should have been. Some of Rückriem’s past works have been weighed down by heavy symbolism, and this almost-closed circle is no exception. But Rückriem’s decision to forgo monumentality for intimacy—each work is only a few feet wide and

View of “Ulrich Rückriem,” 2015.



Justin Adian, *Slow Goodbye*, 2015, oil enamel on canvas on ester foam, 24 ½ × 25 ½ × 4 ½”.

