

Albert Oehlen

Luhring Augustine

531 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 28

Over the course of two decades Albert Oehlen has zigzagged between abstraction and representation, paintbrushes and computer-generated imagery. What has always been present is a self-effacing approach to painting shared with other Germans of his generation, most notably Martin Kippenberger.

Mr. Oehlen's work has melted almost entirely into abstraction. More interesting is that the jocularly that seemed like a mandate in his work, to the point of feeling forced, has mellowed and been absorbed into his execution, to beautiful effect. The results might be termed, perhaps to the chagrin of Mr. Oehlen and his late-70's punk-inspired cohorts, mature.

Mr. Oehlen's canvases are also frequently compared with David Salle's. These paintings retain Mr. Salle's geometric background divisions and grisaille passages, executed with a sign-painter's large-scale accuracy. The artist they most evoke, however, is Francis Bacon, minus the screaming faces and existential angst.

Like Bacon's more abstract canvases, Mr. Oehlen's are filled with

shapes generally referred to as biomorphic or surrealist. In many cases the forms look as if they were being simultaneously drawn and erased. At the center of each painting is a big, smeary spot of pigment, as if the painter had tried to imprint his body on the canvas.

Like Bacon's work, Mr. Oehlen's paintings are gestural, but they skirt the ordinary association with Abstract Expressionism. Here gesture could mean anything from arcs of graffiti to the swipe of a silkscreen squeegee to the rolling of a computer mouse. Mr. Oehlen's colors are also lighter and brighter than Bacon's, and big areas of empty white canvas border the edges.

The remaining outlet for sardonic jokiness is the show's presumably tongue-in-cheek title: "Painter of Light." Perhaps, as a German, Mr. Oehlen is not aware that "The Painter of Light" title has been legally claimed by the American neo-plein-air kitsch painter Thomas Kinkade. On the other hand, given Mr. Oehlen's range of past sources and his propensity for baiting viewers still longing to treat paintings like religious icons, he probably is.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER