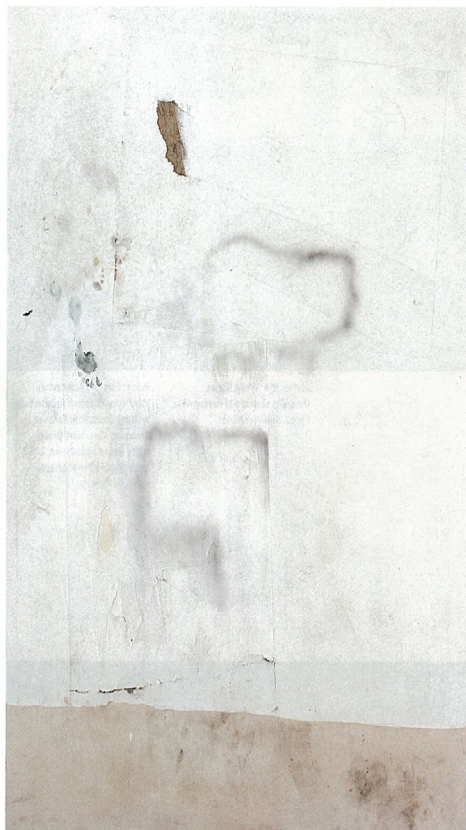


OPENINGS

David Ostrowski

SUZANNE HUDSON



David Ostrowski, *F (Auch die schönste Frau ist an den Füßen zu Ende, Allison's feet)* (F [Even the Most Beautiful Woman Ends at Her Feet, Allison's Feet]), 2012, acrylic, lacquer, cotton, and paper on canvas, wood, 87 x 67 1/4".



David Ostrowski, *F (2012)*, 2010, oil, lacquer, cotton, and wood on canvas, 78 1/2 x 59".

THE DESKILLING OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION is a century-old story. But the "smell of turpentine" that Duchamp so detested has not proved all that easy to leave behind, nor have the qualities—composition, pictoriality, Romantic creativity, the aesthetic—that traditionally come with it. Deskill painting is a Sisyphean task, one enacted continually and never completed, not even with the advent of digital technology. Eliminating subjective choice, it turns out, is

hard. Efforts to undo composition may only deliver it anew, with exigencies produced by external constraints recuperated as pictorial effect. We might put the axiom as something like: The deskill of the author precipitates a reskill of the viewer—not to mention (paradoxically) of the author, who likewise adapts to these parameters and renders them newly operational, trading manual dexterity for discursive facility.

But what if deskill is deliberately deployed to produce an aesthetic, rather than to serve as the alibi for one? Such a gambit would mean that an artist might directly embrace the aesthetic results attending "conceptual" acts. This is the proposition of David Ostrowski's paintings, which equate aleatory processes not with the effort to negate composition or painting as such but with deliberate—albeit imperfect—pictures. This does not mean that Ostrowski

begins with a preconceived notion, much less a play-by-play plan, but rather that he knows a picture will result from his efforts, however hamstrung he may be by self-imposed restraints. And he relishes this fact. As he puts it: "As a right-hander... I try to paint with my right hand, as if it was my left. This is a way to let things happen that I couldn't estimate beforehand." In practice, Ostrowski makes the most of "flaw forms" resulting from lightning-quick mark-making. Often using spray paint, he traces shapes over primer that might or might not be covered over by subsequent layers, which themselves become almost baroque in dense and textured sections. In a group of works from 2009, the graphic, sometimes gestural element is foremost, as white paint sits phosphorescently on top of black. The same effect obtains in newer works with cobalt blue on cloudy white (the cloudiness is the insouciant by-product of dirty floors, across which the fabric has been spread, awaiting deployment).

More often than not, surfaces reveal striations. In many instances, these are actual physical seams where sections of the canvases have been removed, cut, and sutured back together, as in the "mistake painting" *F (Auch die schönste Frau ist an den Füßen zu Ende, Allison's feet)* (F [Even the Most Beautiful Woman Ends at Her Feet, Allison's Feet]), 2012, or they emerge where collaged sheets have been unevenly pasted down to retain a tactile, near-sculptural presence. Elsewhere, they are illusionistic upshots of quick paint application, as with the runny cobalt trails just described, or result from the opening up of space through the application of a piece of foil that garishly reveals in the refraction of light. Such incidents model the canvas as a sketch pad for an unforced informality that is nonetheless carefully executed. If Ostrowski's studied nonchalance seemed paradoxical or improbable, it helps to know that the Cologne-born artist (and member of the collective 1981er) studied painting with Albert Oehlen at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 2004 to 2009. Ostrowski's shifting planes of paper and expressive passages evoke Oehlen's recent admixtures of appropriated imagery and performative smudges, which both articulate form and obscure the latent iconography of advertisements and commercial effluvia for which he is known. Ostrowski, however, drains his recent paintings of imagery, apart from the occasional indexical footprint stamped on the surface or, every so often, a drawn body part. To wit: *F (lan Tiis)*, 2012, which featured in the show "From Bad to Worse" at Ltd Los Angeles last year. Secured in a darkened gallery, it humorously registered the anthropomorphic, quasi-erotic tendencies of the rest of the work—parts kissing parts, traces lingering, all thanks to the contingent coming-together of materials into and as relationships.



Above: David Ostrowski, *F (A Thing Is a Thing in a Whole Which It's Not)*, 2012, oil, lacquer, and adhesive foil on canvas, 17 1/2 x 13 1/4".

Right: David Ostrowski, *F (H)*, 2009, oil and lacquer on canvas, wood, 23 1/2 x 19 1/4".

If much recent painting occurs within quotation marks, Ostrowski's emphatically does not.



But before this passage into evocatively somatic, even relational, abstraction, Ostrowski traded in more readily intelligible iconography, too. One notable group of works, some of which were installed at Mike Potter Projects in Oxford, UK, in 2009, involves owls—symbols of wisdom or harbingers of death, depending on who you consult. Ostrowski exploits this mutability: The owls are alternately loosely figured and slotted into a gridded matrix, blocked out in red or rendered realistically, and incorporated as pliant symbols in otherwise non-objective expanses. In one work, the owl is framed in a blue border, a portent in its own right. Indeed, many of Ostrowski's works now incorporate frames (which might be painted a sunny yellow, black, or some combination thereof) or play with the edges of where the surface stops. Like *F (2012)*, 2010, plenty of panels involve abstract figures rendered askew, as if rotating the picture plane relative to its support; yet here, the blue line reinforces the real boundary as it runs along it. In so many ways, Ostrowski's reduction of means and his nascent, coincidental formalism emphasize the inevitably pictorial nature of what these borders contain. If much recent painting occurs within quotation marks, Ostrowski's emphatically does not.

Yet neither does he attempt to uphold the autonomy synonymous with—and contaminated by—

modernism. The borders aren't enclosures but admissions that painting frames and is framed by history, architecture, and popular culture. When he calls a painting *F (Between Two Ferns)*, it seems not only to nod to comedian Zach Galifianakis's celebrity-interview series but also to be a recognition of where his work might end up—between houseplants, on a domestic wall—and thus an acknowledgment that painting, like everything else, is always on the move. All the while, he examines what a painting is or could be, admitting the possibility of its not being one at all, but hoping for the best. This is a matter of ideology and historicity. It is also a matter of comedy. A great fan of Larry David, Ostrowski cited *Seinfeld* in a recent press release:

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.

I couldn't have said it better myself. □

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