

# Populating a Figure Plane

According to the work of Neo Rauch and Markus Oehlen

A prose of various approaches and strategies

By Ronald Boom

If looking ==== thinking, then painting and observing a painting ===== thinking in images (Willems 2018). A painting is a plane which allows for thinking unconventional thoughts that can't necessarily be put into words (Lyotard 2011). So, when it is said that 'the postmodern' cannot be overseen in one glance (Habermas 1989) it must be a plane holding many different thoughts. This is not strange when everything is possible, as the postmodernists creed dictates. Art has moved from reduction to aggregation, from singular to heterogenous and from autonomous to differentiation (Willems 2018).

Central in this essay is the work of two German painters: Markus Oehlen (1956) a Neue Wilde<sup>1</sup> and Neo Rauch (1960) from the New Leipzig School<sup>2</sup>. While they both create paintings of a multifocal and surreal nature, they both take a totally different approach. By placing the work of both artists in relation to painterly questions dealing with (non)figuration, visual languages and meaning that is inferred within a 'figural polyphony'<sup>3</sup> I hope to come to a better understanding of these approaches (/ways of thinking) in populating a figure plane.

1 The term Neue Wilde was used in Germany for neo-expressionism, a movement which saw the re-emergence of expressive painting in the late 1970s and 1980s

2 New Leipzig School refers to painting in the post-reunification climate of modern Germany linked with the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* in Leipzig

3 Figural: Relating to or denoting a form of signification which relies on imagery and association. + Polyphony: Type of musical texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody (not mono or homophony)

## Neo Rauch

In the work of Neo Rauch “Many things look familiar but are shown in new, illogical connections. Strange jumps in scale, and changes in perspective occur at a whim.” In the essay *to re-enchant the world* (2018), Domonique van den Boogerd describes the people and animals that inhabit the incomprehensible universe of Neo Rauch as “Hybrids that look like they come from a Hieronymus Bosch painting.”

### *Späte Heimkehr* by Neo Rauch, 2013, oil on canvas.

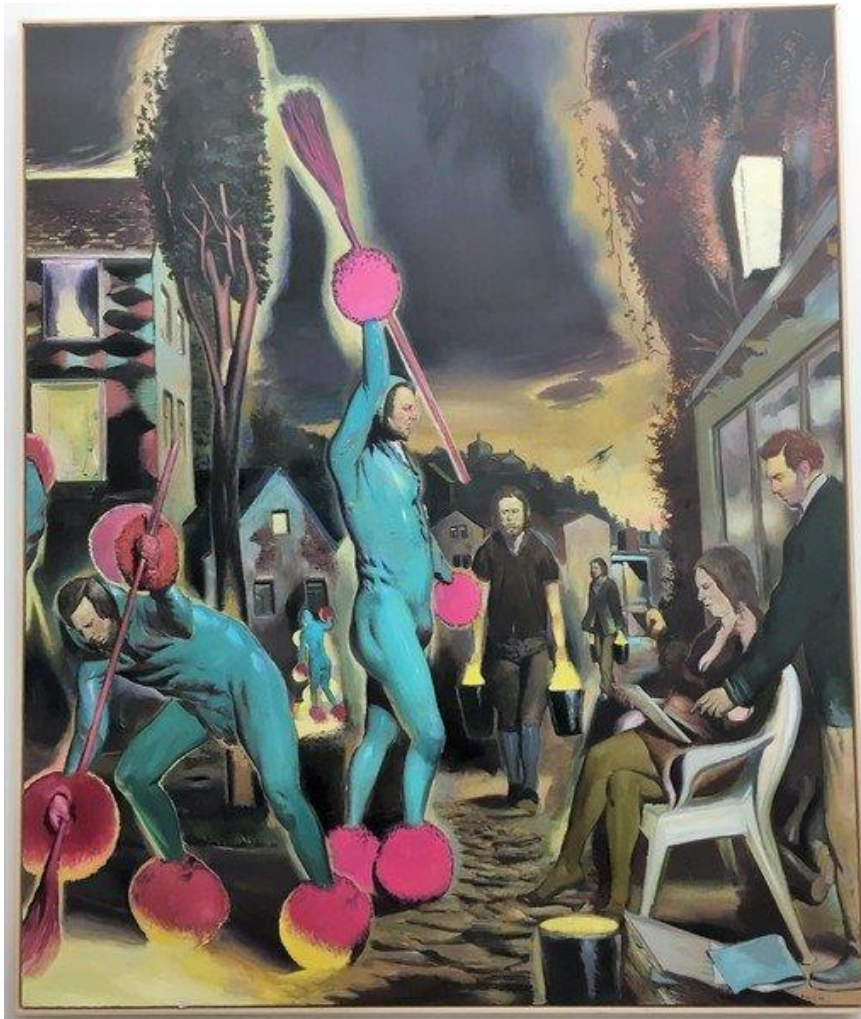


In *Späte Heimkehr* we see a couple of such hybrids (and other inhabitants): A blue bird(man) with a purple tail and a bright pink breast huddles down out on an outcrop. On his sides two men(birds) kneel while holding up their hands in prayer.

“Many of the paintings have a sense of approaching doom, but of what, we never learn.” Van den Boogerd writes while he was perhaps looking at the smoldering world through which the woman returns *home late* in her bright apron and red all-stars. The Lady seems to be floating above the ground saintly with a neon pink goose in her arms. Species, myths (religion) gender and roles are actively mixed up in this tableau vivant.

Van den Boogerd observes that “In both Rauch’s paintings and Grimm’s fairy tales we see things that defy imagination. Rauch’s paintings are as disjointed as how we experience our dreams. (‘Painting is a continuation of a dream with other means’ Rauch is quoted on saying.) But defying logic (as imagination does) doesn’t mean the work is devoid of meaning. Senseless but not. Like fairytales they bring to light hidden motivations like fear, competition and destiny.”

Der Lehrling by Neo Rauch, 2015, oil on canvas, 300 x 250 cm



Two different worlds are tied up so effortlessly in *Der Lehrling* that we soon accept it as a whole. But while looking for something to hold on to we are also continuously being uprooted. It is this unease that makes this work so intriguing.

“The paintings of Neo Rauch are like derailed costume drama’s with characters from different timeframes,” (van den Boogerd). This anachronistic property can be observed in *Der Lehrling*.

We see a (village) lady sitting nonchalantly on a plastic chair while

another (village) man points out something on a map. They both seem to *not* be noticing the oddly dressed men in their tight, turquoise, full body Zentai suits and bright pink cheerleader pompons. These birds of paradise (that dominate half the painting) look like they could be transported straight out of some unknown carnivalesque future.

In *Der Lehrling* the figural plane is shared between two opposing parties that don’t really connect: the apparently *normal*, indifferent inhabitants that belong to the rural village setting? and the *other*, alien and different (yet homogenous) green men that bring disharmony. By placing these two sides together so ambiguously, the work (even though it can be considered anachronistic) also becomes sensitive to topics like how to deal with otherness?

At a first glance, it is so clear that we don’t question who is out of place in this overwhelmingly white and German (?) village. That only after observing details like the yellow paint buckets being brought in from the back and the house on the left, one starts to wonder who is belonging there, and who doesn’t.

## Markus Oehlen

Placed in front of Oehlen's works, the beholder is met by a clear reference to the Op Art style<sup>4</sup>. The painting plays tricks on our consciousness – it mimes the collage's hybrid language in the many paint layers and strong color compositions. Pop and surrealistic elements are combined and overlaid into a complex network, where the use of stabilizing grids and a free use of mild coloring and 3D-effects communicate light, depth and rhythm. (Asbæk)

No Title by Markus Oehlen, 2013, Acryl on canvas, 280 x 450 cm



In this work we see different dynamics at play: A red ball floats next to a silver disk on which four pink dots suggest a face. Is the emoticon face looking at the ball? Or is it the face of the ball reflected in the disk? The intricate

blue/red *Op Art style* pattern on the right veils (a.o) a naked human and a green cactus. The densely rendered computer pattern lifts the (unaffected) red ball from the canvas and pushes a viewer out, 'outside' to the milky left.

On the left we see a window to an empty world inhabited by the impression of a girl. A white horse gallops aimlessly into the air. All around the plane and on top of the red ball are objects and fabrics scattered in strange swirls, bolts, rocks, bushes, heat scanned backpacks, canisters and keychains. Content is reordered in figurative and abstract levels, thus remediating a certain tension that keeps the mind drawn in.

"A picture is an image of reality; a painting is not; it is a reality in itself." As Robert Zandvliet (a Dutch painter) states in 'kunst is lang' (Heezen 2016) "People are context oriented, which makes them forget how to see. Observing closely is simple: what do you see, without describing what it is."

<sup>4</sup> Op Art, short for optical art, is a style of visual art that uses optical illusions that gives the viewer the impression of movement, hidden images, flashing and vibrating patterns, or of swelling or warping.

Is it possible to look without knowing or identifying these figurative objects? Is this what the pre-conditioned mind does? To see a face in four dots (Pareidolia<sup>5</sup>) or to turn a collage into a personal grand meta-narrative that lacks immediate meaning and therefore cannot justify the existence of what is presented to the sight? Unsettling to the observer the effects being used contrast the feeling of recognition in what is presented to the eyes. The work of Markus Oehlen is hard to visually interpret and put into clearly defined boxes, yet this is what makes the work so compelling.

Untitled by Markus Oehlen, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 280 x 450 cm



Imaging being blinded at night by the headlines of an approaching vehicle on a dark forest road. Before the car passes the forest is illuminated briefly. Only afterwards, when your heart calms down and your eyes have adjusted back to normal colored

specs are floating in your vision like strange creatures in the forest. This reminds you of all the times when you thought you saw something but when you looked back and there was nothing.

This unreal space, the periphery of your eyes, where the aliens hide that come to sample us at night. This space is shown in the painting above. But here the 'aliens' are trapped and can be observed by us in return after the eyes have adjusted back to normal.

Rhythm and movement are created in a painting by placing inhabitants in such a composition with (indirect) lines, colors and masses that it causes the eyes to roam around the plane (visually reading or thinking). This visual *free play* invites an observer to stick around. In this work by Markus Oehlen the focal point is so easily located that the observer is tempted to 'go around the painting once' before deciding he or she has 'figured it out.' Because of this, the work almost runs a risk of becoming *lazy* itself. Yet unlike the speeding car on the dark forest road we can turn back and take time to consider it fully, and to readjust the mind in order to accept the specs that float in the periphery of our minds.

<sup>5</sup> Pareidolia is the tendency for incorrect perception of a stimulus as an object, pattern or meaning known to the observer, such as seeing shapes in clouds or seeing faces in inanimate objects.

Work by Markus Oehlen - Unknown title and format.



While looking for the title of this (still unknown) painting by Markus Oehlen the reverse image search algorithm from google only managed to come up with variations of the following:



Some of the 'paintings' of Markus Oehlen are indeed (huge) drawings. This one keenly balances in the middle.

In this work the drawing part brings forth some sort of careful topological exploration

of a landscape. The lines merge in a packed area that could be a shoulder or a head of a pharaoh. The hieroglyphical figure is sitting on top of the familiar fabrics scattered in strange swirls on the floor. The whole of two different languages (painting and drawing) is tied together on one plane. Or when looking closer it might even appear that a thin sheet is drawn over the (under) painting. A sheet of cloth, or a sheet of paint? It is in the difference that these two languages can form their own polyphony. They don't unite, they stay true to themselves.

## Conclusion

Driving by to go from A to B (Utilizing the means to achieve a goal) reduces the illogical, incorrect and abnormal to an uninvested passing by. The journey into a painting is the opposite. How visual thought is organized we don't exactly know, but it is hard to be expressed in language. Therefore, the meaning of a painting is based within the observation. (Willems 2018) It is questioning how observation works, how our minds work and who we are.

A two-dimensional plane simultaneously populated by a manifold of (visual) ideas creates a figural polyphony that examines how we deal with these differences as introduced in the paintings of Neo Rauch and Markus Oehlen: Amorphous shapes or recognizable hybrids move freely, even anarchistic between each other, languages, layers and meanings in our conditioned minds when exposed to this *otherness*. Like a dive into the undetermined; observation is in the periphery, the connotation and in the difference.

Moving with and past the 'real' (that what is there) allows for the figural plane to be colonized differentially in new, uneasy and needful ways.

'Populating a figure plane'  
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DOGtime 4, 2020.

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