

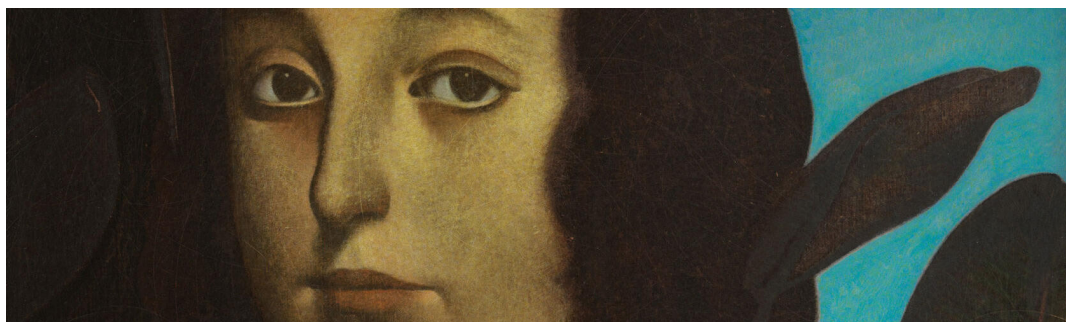
Tanya Leighton

FRIEZE

Oliver Osborne's Masterclass in Painterly Discipline

At Tanya Leighton, Berlin, the artist's labour-intensive portraits suggest an art historical fever dream

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Were a person to analyze the role of nostalgia in contemporary art, it would be challenging to find a better case study than the freakishly talented and psychedelically old-fashioned painter Oliver Osborne.

The artist's current show at Tanya Leighton, Berlin consists of a set of oil-paint portraits on linen, sharply contrasted by the pared-down conceptualism of three larger canvases. One of the latter, the show's biggest piece, is a composite of four separate canvases. Their surfaces are all untouched, except that the exhibition's title, 'German Afternoons', is embroidered on one in small and elegant red script, along with a few paint drops, mimicked using the same red thread. Given the lack of paint in this painting, the blood-resemblant drips sneakily pay homage to the medium's often-declared but unfulfilled death. The second of the show's large blank-canvas pieces is also constructed from four sections, hung in pairs on either side of a projected section of wall. The third is painted with a grid pattern in cloudy pastel, echoing the shape of the canvas stretcher.

These pieces are foils to the exhibition's sadistically labour-intensive portraits, eight of which depict an androgynous person looking calmly out towards the viewer: shoulders quarter-turned, face framed by thick-flowing hair. Although it appears to be the same person in every painting, dramatic variations in skin tone – hues of pink, golden yellow, stony green – cast the figures as variations on a single avatar. The same principle applies to two portraits of a jowly Friar Tuck type.

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Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton



Oliver Osborne, *A Portrait of a Fat Man (after Robert Campin)*, 2022, oil on linen, 28 × 26 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; Photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

One is grey-skinned as if taken by the pall of death, while the other's epidermis is third-degree-sunburn red and amplified by a citrus-yellow sky. Plant leaves often backdrop their sitters at weirdly architectonic angles, while two further portraits, which feature rubber plants, form a ligature to Osborne's plant-heavy work of recent years.

From flora to humanoid faces to the art of painting, nothing is quite what it seems. This includes Osborne's Old Worldliness, which is evidenced in his painting technique, whose extreme subtlety springs from The Netherlands between the 15th and 17th centuries. Then there are his backgrounds, dusky like those of 19th-century symbolism, and the glossy black stepped frames which encase each painting and are so stuffy that they're fresh. This show is a masterclass in discipline by a new Old Master, and Osborne divulges his artistic influences with equal exactitude. While all of the works are titled *German Afternoons* followed by a number, or in one case left untitled, the sickly Friar is named in tribute to an enigmatic Dutch master: *A Portrait of a Fat Man (after Robert Campin)* (2022).

There's an unlikely intimacy here as classical techniques are painstakingly interwoven with a desire to experience historical painting by reinventing it. Particularly idiosyncratic is Osborne's technique of repeatedly layering and sanding, so that the undercoats of the paintings shimmer to the surface like mirages. *German Afternoons No. 11* (2022) pushes this strategy into trans-technological sublimity, with a doubled subject akin to the flicker of a dying computer screen. Meanwhile the paintings' radioactive backgrounds suggest an art historical fever dream.

Tanya Leighton



Oliver Osborne, *German Afternoons No. 11*, 2022, oil on linen, 48.2 × 44.1 cm, Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; Photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

Osborne simultaneously embraces and rejects old-school painting via a technique so mechanically refined that it verges on being no technique at all. Almost twisted in its internal incongruity, this approach expresses the conflict inherent in one's aesthetic tastes being stranded in the metaphysical blur of the past – a kind of nostalgia, to be sure. Osborne's skill lays in knowing that his job is not to cure but to echo and amplify this troublesome feeling, and that this requires an unflinching embrace of painting's antediluvian thrill.

Oliver Osborne's 'German Afternoons' is on view at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, until 27 August.

Main image: Oliver Osborne, *German Afternoons No. 2*, 2022, oil on linen, 45.2 × 40.2 cm, Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; Photograph: Gunter Lepkowski