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German painter Albert Oehlen's work at Berggruen belongs in the category I call comic abstraction.

A paradox has always lain close to the heart of abstract painting: the idea of a picture without depiction. Various artists have mobilized this paradox for their own purposes in the past century or so. When Oehlen does it, he produces a sort of burlesque of the crack-up of modernism.

Just look at an untitled picture from 2005. Cobbling together various ingredients of modernism - expressionistic gesture, biomorphic form, drips, the grid - it produces a stylistic equivalent of "riding off in all directions." Perhaps only his improvisation chimes unironically with modernist seriousness.

A kind of perverse athleticism animates Oehlen's work, like that of his older contemporary, Sigmar Polke. Oehlen's pictures may seem to churn and splutter, but they never repeat themselves, from what we can tell in this modest selection from three decades.

Before he came to prominence with the resurgence of painting in Germany in the 1980s, Oehlen engaged in various high jinks with fellow artists Martin Kippenberger (1953-1997) and Werner Büttner. Something of their satiric critical spirit persists in Oehlen's art.

Behind his demolition of the modernist idea that art progresses, Oehlen's work winks out the question whether a painter can mean his work in any sense that its history can teach us to recognize. More than a matter of the artist's creative posture, this is a question of the cultural and political pressures bearing on painting and its reception. Oehlen's art does not illuminate those pressures, for their specifics will continue to change; it merely makes us sense them with fresh discomfort.

On the floor above the Oehlen show, Berggruen presents new work by East Bay painter Tom McKinley. It comes nearly untouched by the anxieties and ironies that inform Oehlen's art.

Yet McKinley does offer an anti-utopian flavor of his own. "Eight Red Books" (2008) envisions a kind of desert spa with a row of casketlike lounge chairs facing a wide desert-floor vista across a long shelf punctuated with red books. It brings to mind the work of Southern Californian John Register (1939-1996) and its debt to the American Scene surrealism of Edward Hopper (1882-1967).

But McKinley has a repertoire of little art jokes that Hopper would probably never have allowed himself, such as the sliver of a Robert Mangold painting echoing the spiral staircase in "Pied-à-Terre" (2007).

McKinley describes perfected domestic worlds so rigidly ruled by ideas of style as to eclipse any possibility of living. Only his evident pleasure in making the paintings offsets their mood.

"Cube, Sphere, Cone" (2008) evokes this thought by describing a bedroom with window views of a snowy landscape, in which the interior looks as cold as the outdoors. "Marina" (2007) puts it differently, by means of a pictographic warning sign on the pier, showing a car pitching into water. It reads in this setting as an admonition against suicide.