

On rejecting professionalism



An interview with painter David Ostrowski

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As told to Julian Brimmers, 1764 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Painting](#), [Education](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#).

Your grandmother Krystyna Żywulka was a writer and satirist. Your parents are artists, too. Does your family history inform your art in any way?

As a child, my grandmother Krystyna and I used to paint competitively with one another, like, who can paint things more nicely. She would always let me win, which surely affected my confidence from early on. My mother, who is a singer and actress, and my father, a graphic designer and sculptor, can paint as well. A couple of relatives from my mother's family have a similar background, such as my grandfather, who was an architect, or my great-grandfather, who did stage design. I guess me becoming an artist wasn't entirely improbable. However, I know artists whose fathers were butchers and they still paint more beautiful pictures than I do.

There's a prominent *Seinfeld* quote on the wall of the MD Bar you founded with your artist friend Michail Pirgelis in Cologne. What role does humor play in your work?

Without humor, I couldn't stand my own works. There's almost no piece that couldn't be meant ironically but also dead serious at the same time. I don't go to my studio exclusively for fun, but to paint the best possible piece, which demands more and more strength with every new attempt. The titles of my pictures are, for the most part, autobiographically tinged and always relate to the individual piece in a very direct manner. I also like to give good titles to lesser artworks, just to keep things balanced. In general, I can enjoy any type of comedy, it really comes down to the respective comedian and how he or she delivers their punchlines.



F (Oben Putz unten Schmutz), 2012, lacquer on canvas, 220 x 160 cm, Courtesy the artist

You studied under Albert Oehlen at Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. What does an academic arts education have to provide their students with? In hindsight, what would you advice your first-semester self in order to make the most out of it?

Studying art ideally offers a wide array of possibilities to try things out. It should be as liberal in spirit as possible, with an optional education in art history. The importance of exchanging ideas with your peers can't be overestimated. That said, I've never ever painted worse than I did during my stint at the academy. In retrospect I would advise freshman David to drink more beer, simply because it takes so long for my body to go back to normal nowadays.

When you got accepted into the academy, you still painted figuratively for the most part, then you gravitated further towards minimalism and abstraction in the process. How did your environment react to this?

I'd say my environment is well-disposed towards me, and yet some were concerned with my artistic development. And indeed this path to reduction can be seen as a step backwards. Progress through regress, technically speaking. I am fueled by the need to create new things, to create something incomprehensible that is yet unknown. On the one hand, this idealist goal to explore new terrain in my painting seems impossible to achieve, but it also keeps the tension up for me. How can I appropriate existing art that I like and transform it into my own form of expression? What recipes do I have to add, how much can I steal, and who do I need to kill in the process? Figurative painting bears too many clues.



The F Word, ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, 2015, Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

What was your professionalization like? From an outside perspective it seemingly all went very fast for you.

The same people who trashed my work at first became prospective buyers years later. To be honest, I still feel like I never underwent a real process of professionalization. I hope I will never become a professional. I've been deliberately keeping things quiet for some time now. I rarely partake in exhibitions. My paintings have been my only real contact with the art world anyways.

How do you avoid tensing up when you fail to bring an idea onto the canvas as imagined?

In my studio I apply certain tricks that hopefully result in a loss of control. I deliberately try to let loose. Ideas and concepts are overrated with regards to the way I work, I feel, just because it is so much more concerned with evoking a desired notion of chance. Some time ago, the resulting errors helped me a great deal, but even that method eventually leads to overthinking. It becomes its own routine, which is counterproductive and boring. I seek to achieve the highest possible emotion with the simplest, fewest possible means. Hence I work almost exclusively with found objects from my studio. The more time I spent there, the more material I gather. My studio is my haven. It's the room where I can think, where I listen to music on full volume, and where I pay too much rent.

Speaking about this search for the strongest affect with the fewest means possible, you mentioned the "codes of the painter"—what do you mean by that?

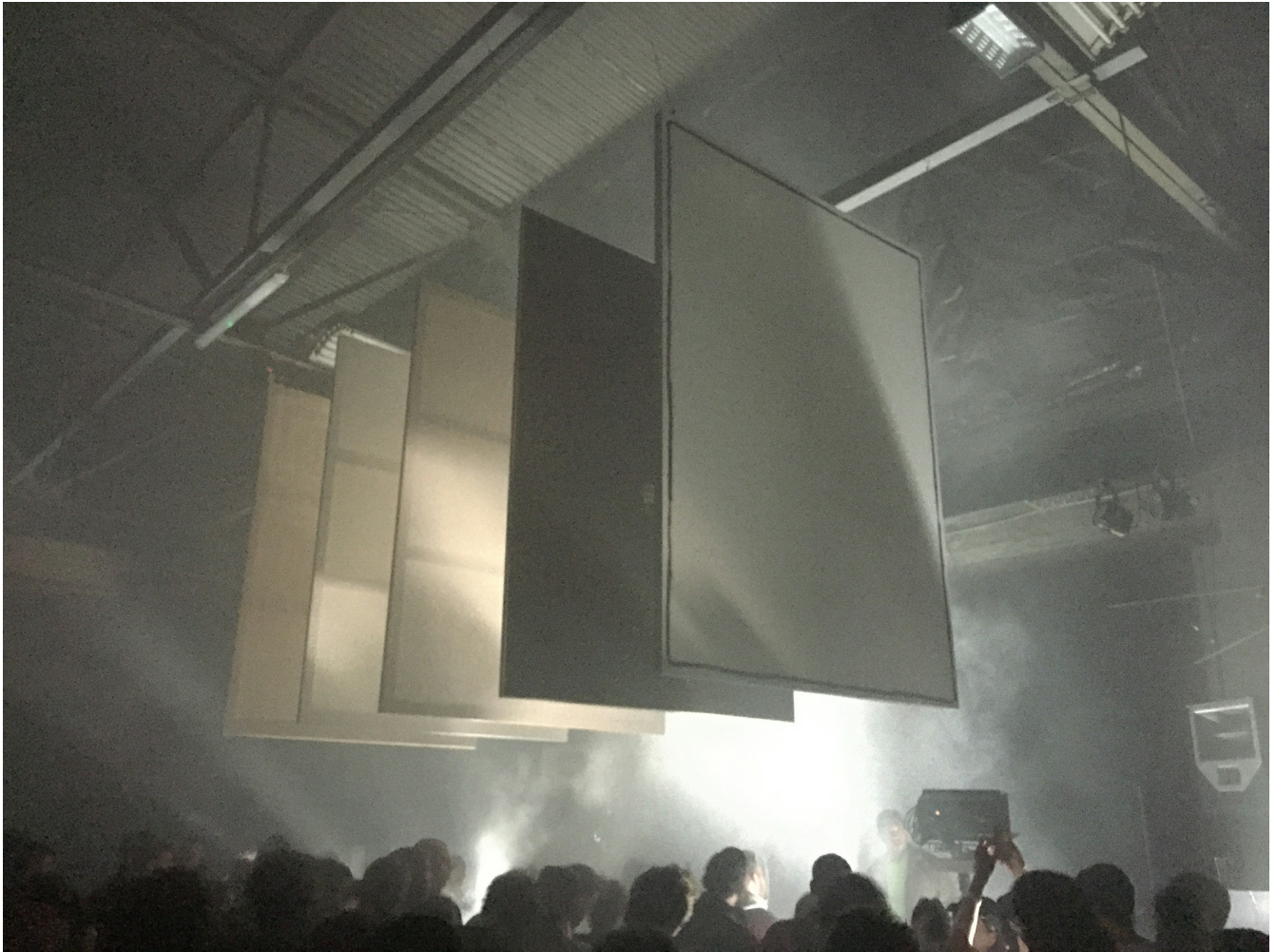
To me these are subjective painting codes that stand in relation to the acquired knowledge about the medium of painting, about other artists and one's own experience. According to the principle: the more you know, the more you're aware of what you don't want.

Is a beautiful painting necessarily an accomplished painting?

I'd rather say, an accomplished painting doesn't necessarily have to be beautiful, but attractiveness doesn't hurt either. Sometimes I use stuff I find in the studio, dirty cotton for instance and glue, or stretch them out on the canvas. It's an attempt to process the full palette of beauty markers in my paintings. Hopefully my canvases will always appear lean and smell nice.

One of the main challenges in any creative discipline seems the finishing of a piece. How do you know when a painting is done?

A piece is finished when I don't have anything more to say. My works are suggestions and I tend to create series of works to avoid routine. Of course I test every painting for its legitimacy. Worst case the canvas gets torn, painted or pasted over.



DONT, Halle9 Kirowwerk, Leipzig, 2017, Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

How difficult is being your own quality control? Do you have people that help you with the evaluation of your works?

Whether I think something is good or bad heavily depends on my mood and concentration on the day. I regularly paint revolutionary and trailblazing pictures that land in the garbage bin three days later. My colleague Michail Pargelis has similarly strict views, I take his critique to heart, especially because he knows my works since the very beginning.

How does your relationship to the colors and materials you use change while working with them?

I work with a narrow color palette. Oftentimes it consists of colors I did not particularly like so far. It's the attempt to incorporate certain colors to a degree that I can live with them. By now I even like blue. White paint evokes innocence and purity. White is also the most neutral. And I'm still on bad terms with red.



F (Yes or let's say no), 2013, acrylic, lacquer and paper on burlap, wood, 241 x 191 cm, Courtesy the artist

How do you incorporate music into your exhibitions and what role does music play in your daily work?

Currently I'm interested in projects for which I try to set up a dialog between certain types of music and my art. It's almost impossible because you have two very complex worlds collide. But that's part of the charm. The DJ is not supposed to play additionally or randomly at the opening but perform his own art form autonomously. I understand such projects as an attempt and a playground for experimentation, but also for failure.

Music plays an important role in my work. It's what motivates and distracts me. A day at the studio can be absolutely shitty. Music is a constant. At the same time, it's a love-hate relationship because from early on I had to come to terms with the fact that painting does not even remotely evoke emotions as strong, fast, and easy as music does. It sounds cheesy, which it should, but music always comes first for me. I would be happy if my works were regarded as having musical qualities. I also like to watch TV.



Bei mir geht es in den Keller hoch, Blueproject Foundation, Barcelona, 2017, Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

From the initial ideas to the hanging of the pictures to your public image, you understand everything as part of your body of work. Is it hard for you to emotionally detach from your pieces after they're being sold?

Sometimes I only realize in retrospect that I've let go of a piece too early. Especially some key pieces I have a hard time detaching from.

You describe yourself as a romantic and old-fashioned painter. Does nostalgia have a negative connotation for you?

I perceive nostalgia as something beautiful, I like to revel in memories. I regularly stand with my easel at the bank of the Rhine and paint the whales. For me, a term with a negative connotation would be, for instance, "post-internet."

You exclusively work as a painter. Why is painting still your preferred mode of expression?

It feels to me like I'm only at the beginning and there's still a lot to discuss and process within the realms of painting. In this life, I wouldn't even have the time to work in other media. And in my next life I'd like to be a horse.



David Ostrowski, Nothing Happened (with Michail Piregelis), Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, 2017.

David Ostrowski's top 5 movie scenes:

[C'était un rendez-vous by Claude Lelouch](#)

[Lui è peggio di me by Enrico Oldoini](#)

[Talladega Nights by Adam McKay](#)

[Step Brothers by Adam McKay](#)

[A Night at the Roxbury by John Fortenberry](#)

[Name](#)

David Ostrowski

[Vocation](#)

Artist

