

# THE DAVID OSTROWSKI ENIGMA

## HYPE OR HERO – OR BOTH? SLEEK MEETS THE CURRENT IT-BOY OF GERMAN ART AND ASKS WHAT HE MAKES OF THE NEW MARKET MANIA

INTERVIEW — Anneli Botz

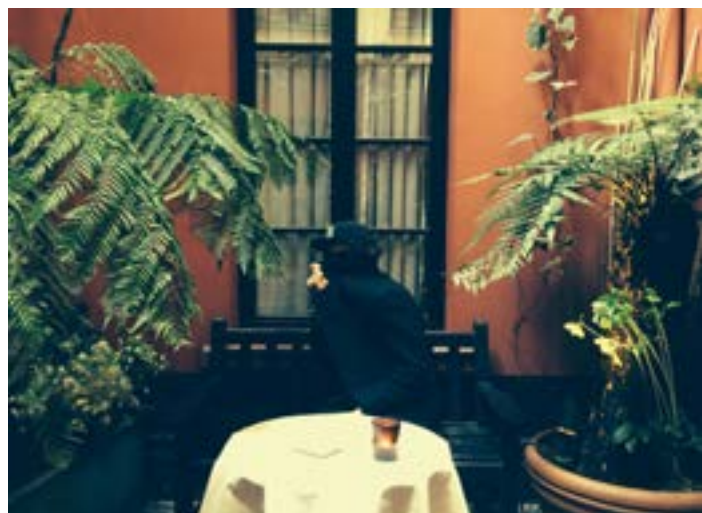


Photo: Nick Königsnecht

David Ostrowski's Emotional Paintings exhibition at Peres Projects was touted as one of the highlights of Berlin's Gallery Weekend in May this year, yet visitors to Karl-Marx-Allee were surprised to find the vast space rather selectively filled, with only four large canvases present. Although impressive in size, they hung lightly in the room, as if released from any architectural boundaries, evoking lightness and peacefulness in their minimalistic use of colour and accentuated gestures.

Thirty-two-year-old Ostrowski himself is known as a rather shy protagonist in the cut and thrust the art world. Hesitant to give interviews, reluctant to be photographed, he often hides away in the office space during his openings. Yet his path to success seems unstoppable: each of the four paintings at Peres Projects was instantly sold for €50,000, and there is a waiting list for those pieces that are yet to be created.

Ostrowski is hardly alone in participating in the enormous next wave of hype around contemporary art, whether deliberately or involuntarily. Never have there been more artists graduating from art schools, never have the prices paid for pieces been higher, and never has the craving for new talent seemed more intense.

But how does that actually reflect on the artist himself – and where does it leave the true value of his art? Are we witnessing a well-thought-through marketing structures of galleries and collectors, or a struggle between promising artists and their gallerists to keep career growth, artistic development and value as natural as possible by drip-feeding pieces and in isolating the artist and their work from the rising demand to create sustainability? Those are the questions we took to Ostrowski himself.

His studio is located on the riverside in Cologne, where he was born and raised, a city to which he has remained faithful. Loud hip hop greets visitors to his artistic playground: dozens of spraycans lie on the floor, and in the middle a couch offers a 360-degree view on the huge canvases leaning against the walls. Ostrowski usually uses the 200 x 150 cm size, though the pieces he just showed in Berlin are even bigger. Clearly, he has no fear of scale.

"I know people always say: prove it on a small canvas, but I have already done that," he says. "The truth is, there is nothing for me to fall into because this level does not even exist. I feel differently with small canvases compared to the big ones. And I feel hardly anything already." Then he corrects himself: "I feel too much, therefore I suppress."

Ostrowski is an emotional and thoughtful artist. Having analysed the way he paints over the past years, the former Albert Oehlen student and graduate of Kunstakademie Düsseldorf only recently came to a state that he terms the very beginning of the story he has to tell. After years of painting mainly figuratively, he got annoyed by people judging his art over his obvious talent for drawing, and asked himself about the outcome and overall contribution of that. Over time, a natural process took place where he learned to open up and let loose, allowing him to become more and more abstract,

a progression he himself calls a very beautiful one. "If I look at my current work today I can still see the lines I drew back in the day, but they are probably invisible to most," he explains.

The way he works nowadays has to be like a continuous movement, without sketching or planning. His pieces are of a rare beauty and invite the viewer with a subtle aesthetic that finds its explanation in the depth of colour and size, in simple but intelligent compositions, and the minimalised mixture of materials which allow a loose but haptic experience. Ostrowski leaves room for coincidences and mistakes, which manifest themselves in accents: of sprayed colour, of a wiped paintbrush, of a piece of linen, or stains and stripes. The painter stresses that these mistakes and coincidences are mainly a result of decisions he makes intuitively while working. The possibility of choices is something he would like to diminish as much as possible.

"What I basically try to do is to work with the most simple conditions but to achieve the uttermost, on an emotional level. The fewer options the better." Which is also why he started working with varnish, which takes away the ability to correct. "There is only the one

option. Do or die. And if you fail, you fail," Ostrowski says, smiling.

Ostrowski has a very selective view on the world; he is decisive and witty about it. On the question of mood, he laughs and answers, "Mainly shitty, to alright. I am constantly unsatisfied, bored and unmotivated. When I am happy I always try to capture this moment of happiness and question its origin, because I want to know how to keep it."

"I am a hyper-sensitive being," he says. "Which means, that my pieces are me. Because I can find pictorial solutions doesn't mean that I will also find a solution to my personal problems. I think I was under the impression that I was able to distinguish these two worlds as soon as I shut the door to my studio. But now I know that this is not possible, but that everything is constantly obliterating. Maybe the paintings offer solutions that will never manifest themselves in reality. But then at least you tried and maybe it is all about this search for meaning, right?"

On whether he has been surprised by the positive reception to his way of painting, he agrees, but also distances himself from a public opinion that doesn't offer any kind of ultimate validation to him personally. "Only because somebody out there likes it, does not mean that your stuff is actually good."

And it's interesting to consider how the world of a young, successful, deeply artistic and emotionally-driven practitioner collides with the harshness of the contemporary art market, which is mainly about profit maximisation and pushing market value as high as possible. "You'd think that there are many people in the art world with an emotional intelligence, because it is such a sensitive territory," Ostrowski notes. "But I am often surprised about how hardcore people are in this genre. There is so little emotional exchange. And they all pretend to know what you are talking about. The rareness of emotional intelligence is absolutely underestimated. How seldom people let loose in this industry."

Before this year's Gallery Weekend, one could sometimes witness people quietly wondering whether Ostrowski's elusiveness was a technique for nurturing a myth, about pushing the hype and prices. In February this year one of his paintings was sold at Phillips in London for \$142,206, blowing its pre-sale estimates of \$16,000 to \$25,000 out of the water. But how much of the secondary market value is actually

in the artist's interest? Ostrowski has a strong opinion about the current development of young artists being determined by the secondary market. "The secondary market has nothing to do with the artist

for the highest price begins and the artist's market value is pushed and pushed. But what many do not realise is that it is not the artist himself who earns \$150,000 for the piece sold at an auction." Ostrowski



is filled with gratitude towards his gallerists who carefully select collectors as people who buy his art for the art's sake.

The secondary market is a whole different deal though. Despite the honour he feels for his public recognition, he still thinks that this rapid development is not necessarily in favour of someone like himself, stressing that he sees himself at just the beginning of his career. Where he and his gallerists foster a natural growth of the market value for his art in smaller steps, the secondary market draws a light on his work that makes him appear as someone who has already established himself. Far from being arrogant about it, he naturally believes it would be stupid to complain about his current stratospheric success. But it is understandable that this sudden boom can be both fortune and burden.

Ostrowski himself has made his mind up about hype in general, and knows that many factors play into his growing success, not only the pure appreciation of his work but also fame, reputation and marketing. "Of course I know how hype actually functions and why many people suddenly think the same thing to be great. This is true for every situation of the mainstream in life and one should not believe that the context of art makes any difference here." He puts great emphasis on the judgement and presence of those close to him. "The best feeling still is, when your friends, people whom you value and in the best case other artists, tell you that they like your work. I think this is the highest goal. Because they would also tell you if your work was shit."

Over the dinner we share, an email reaches Ostrowski about the sale of one of his pieces at Christie's in New York. This work doesn't belong to him anymore, and is liberated from the artist's influence completely. It reached a price of \$245,000. Ostrowski seems momentarily thoughtful, a bit irritated and slightly withdrawn.

"It is just so absurd," he says. And then he smiles.

Top  
DAVID OSTROWSKI  
F (Musik ist Scheisse), 2014

Lacquer on canvas, wood  
400 x 350 cm

Bottom  
F (I want to die forever), 2014

Linen on canvas, wood  
400 x 350 cm  
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin  
Photos: Hans-Georg Gaul, Berlin