

Oliver Osborne - *Der Tegernseer Bauernjunge*

16.05. – 20.06.2026

Oliver Osborne (born in Edinburgh in 1985, lives and works in Berlin) presents a group of new works in his first solo exhibition at Paulina Caspari. The exhibition title, '*Der Tegernseer Bauernjunge*,' refers to August Macke's portrait of the same name from 1910, a portrait of a village child from Macke's Tegernsee Year, which is now in the collection of the Lenbachhaus in Munich, and alludes to Osborne's practice, which is characterised by the intertwining of the present and the historical.

For Osborne, history does not mean the accumulation of a canonical body of knowledge, but rather a relationship that must be continually renegotiated, in which the study of older painting opens up the possibility of expanding the traditional canon and shifting the boundaries that modernism has deliberately drawn. Through his in-depth study of Cézanne's portrait of his son, which he encountered in the Tate Modern retrospective in 2022, Osborne came to engage with the genre of children's portraits, which is continued in the exhibition. The paintings function as amalgams in which different forms of closeness converge: the familiarity that emerges from the recognition of art-historical references and the painter's bond with his models. In Osborne's most recent works, it is the faces of his own children that appear in the portraits.

The exhibition is accompanied by a text by **Prof. Dr. Ulrich Pfisterer**, Director of the Central Institute for Art History and, since 2006, Professor of Art History at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. After completing his doctorate at the University of Göttingen and his habilitation at the University of Hamburg, he undertook research stays at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, the Getty Research Centre in Los Angeles and the CASVA at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. His work focuses on early modern art in Europe as well as the methodology and historiography of art history.

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Text by Prof. Dr. Ulrich Pfisterer

At the very moment of their greatest triumph, images today risk losing all power. Until quite recently, it seemed that the roughly 15 billion photographs and video clips produced daily across social media had definitively seized control of global communication, attention, and affect. Then, suddenly, artificial intelligence (AI) entered the scene. It doesn't just multiply images; it fundamentally changes their status. Produced with unprecedented ease, entirely detached from reality yet no longer distinguishable from it, this new mode of production strips the image, as we have understood it until now, of any stable foundation. What is at stake is not only the documentary credibility of photography, but also—and more fundamentally—our basic assumptions about the visual arts, creativity, and originality. AI can manipulate representation at will or render it in virtually any artistic style. At the same time, it can instantly generate images and virtual worlds of its own—worlds that, in the best-case scenario, can sell for more than \$400,000 at auction, soon be housed in their own museum (DATALAND in Los Angeles, opening in June 2026), and are already in the process of upending the “rules of the art system” from within. With the aid of 3D texture printing, these virtual creations effortlessly cross the boundary between digital code and screen-based representation on the one hand, and physical reality on the other. Under such conditions, why—and how—should anyone still believe in drawing or oil painting, especially figurative painting? To be or not to be: this defining question now confronts artists and audiences, collectors, and museums alike.

Oliver Osborne confronts these challenges through works that frequently employ three central formal strategies: references to older artworks, at times overlaid with figures from the present; seriality; and a thin, layered application of paint. This technique leaves the weave of the canvas exposed and appears either monochromatic or reduced to a narrow range of basic colors. *Der Tegernseer Bauernjunge* (Farmboy from Tegernsee)—the exhibition's titular work—refers to August Macke's 1910 painting of the same name, now in Munich's Lenbachhaus. Osborne traced the original image precisely onto his own canvas. Yet it is not only the narrower format, tighter cropping, and altered palette that create a markedly different effect. Macke's young man—modeled through bold brushwork and broad planes of color, seated in tense concentration with a distant yet alert gaze—becomes, in Osborne's version, a fragile, slightly dreamy, melancholic boy lacking any real corporeal presence. The blue tonalities and exposed canvas structure further reinforce this impression (compare, by contrast, Osborne's portrait of a boy in May, evening, 2024, also included in the exhibition).

Osborne draws inspiration not only from German Expressionism, but from the full breadth of European art history since the fifteenth century. He has become particularly fascinated by the figure of a young sleeping man in the fresco cycle of Florence's Brancacci Chapel—a foundational work of the Early Renaissance begun by Masolino and Masaccio between 1425 and 1427 and completed by Filippino Lippi in 1485. Within the narrative of the fresco, the figure is a guard posted outside Saint Peter's prison, unaware that the apostle is being miraculously freed by an angel. For the series *The Sleeping Guard*, however, Osborne does not directly reproduce Filippino Lippi's figure. Instead, he has his much younger son assume the pose of the sleeping guard and paints him from life. If Osborne's adaptation drains *Der Tegernseer Bauernjunge* of its vital energy, then *The Sleeping Guard*, through its translation into the contemporary world, seems instead to be infused with new life.

This method of “re-activating” historical masterworks by reenacting their poses through living models was likely first employed systematically by Annibale Carracci in Bologna and Rome at the end of the sixteenth century. Carracci, too, was responding to a profound crisis in art and attempting a kind of revival of painting. On the one hand, it was argued at the time that Michelangelo and Raphael had already brought art to its absolute pinnacle. On the other, the Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation demanded a mode of painting whose highest purpose was not artistic innovation, but faith and devotion. For Carracci, the combination of historical models and direct engagement with life itself seemed to offer a solution capable of leading painting out of this impasse with renewed legitimacy. The method, however, soon became a standard exercise within the newly founded art academies, which subjected students to endless study from nude models posed in classical attitudes. Originally conceived as a path toward new freedom and a new future, the procedure thus turned into its exact opposite: a constricting academic corset from which the avant-gardes would later violently emancipate themselves. After more than a century, Osborne and others are now once again employing the method in something closer to its original sense.

Osborne's serial variation of motifs can also be understood against this backdrop. The exhibition makes it possible to trace this process through the example of the *Sleeping Guard* series: beginning with the pose of the Early Renaissance figure, Osborne explores a range of formal possibilities while gradually establishing distance from the historical model and introducing new emphases in relation to it.

In making these choices, Osborne does not select his reference artists primarily on the basis of art-historical calculation—even if names such as Mantegna or Velázquez inevitably signal a certain ambition regarding the artistic level to which he himself aspires.

One is nevertheless inclined to accept Osborne's own account that these selections arise first and foremost from personal encounters with artworks—in Edinburgh, Florence, Milan, Berlin ...

All the more surprising, then, is one's encounter with the portrait Michel Majerus (from the Albrecht Fuchs photograph) II (2026). Osborne had already portrayed Paul Klee in 2018, and it is easy to see how Klee's intense engagement with formal and chromatic problems, together with his dry application of paint, might have influenced Osborne's own work. By contrast, the style of the Luxembourgish painter Michel Majerus, who died in 2002—with its intensely colored, expressively applied fields of paint that expand into immersive installations—could at first glance hardly seem further removed from Osborne's gallery-based paintings. Rather, Osborne appears initially to have been drawn to the comic and gaming elements within Majerus's visual worlds. Such elements can also be found in Osborne's work, though only in paintings produced before 2016. The first version of the Majerus portrait, by contrast, was created in 2022. It is based on a photograph freely available on Wikipedia, originally showing Majerus leaning against a window and depicted down to the knees, but now tightly cropped to the head and upper torso. Both this first version and the second portrait shown in the exhibition are conceived not as formal engagements with another artist's work, but rather—as Osborne himself has stated—as homages to an artist who perceptively recognized the fundamental transformations brought about by the digital and the internet with regard to the temporality, location, and agency of painting. At the same time, Michel Majerus (from the Albrecht Fuchs photograph) II also points to the radically altered conditions of seeing and understanding in the age of the World Wide Web: with a single search query, the photograph of Majerus appears instantly on a smartphone screen. What until only a few decades ago were arcane, scholarly, or deeply personal systems of visual reference have today become universally accessible.

It is evident that the years 2020/2021—immediately preceding the rise of AI—marked a turning point for Osborne as a painter. His initial experimental phase, with studies of apples or rubber plant leaves treated as photorealistic formal problems alongside comic elements, body studies, and a small number of installations, comes to an end with the inscription *Der kleine Angsthase* ("The Little Scaredy Rabbit") on an otherwise white-painted canvas (2020). Tiny black specks of paint evoke the trembling hand holding the brush. Following this is the 2021 *Untitled*: a completely empty white canvas, a *tabula rasa*. Parallel to the rise of image-generating AI, Osborne had arrived at his personal "zero point" of both painting and creative anxiety. His redemption came through art history—through his turn toward works by earlier painters, first encountered in the *Gemäldegalerie* of his adopted city, Berlin. The starting point for this new line of inquiry was Osborne's 2021 adaptation of Robert Campin's *Portrait of a Fat Man of 1425*, a work not yet entirely free of reminiscences of the rubber plant leaves.

Finally, another characteristic feature of Osborne's painting becomes increasingly apparent: the visible canvas structure, first fully developed in *Velázquez Boy* (2023), a second version of which (2026) is included in the exhibition. In response to the omnipresence of digital images, Osborne creates a kind of "pixelation" of representation while at the same time emphasizing the material presence of painting itself—and thus its strongest contrast to the virtual. The fact that Osborne frames all of his works and presents them behind glass, evoking both the conventions of classical museum display and the surface of the screen, further intensifies this ambivalence. Taken as a whole, however, Osborne's work is not aimed at provocation, critique, or rupture.

His dreamlike, melancholy-tinged worlds open onto an artistic perspective that recalls the "earthly paradises" of the decades around 1900—Hans von Marées, Puvis de Chavannes, or indeed August Macke with his affirmatively charged images of an intact world. Osborne's insistence on (drawing and) oil painting within a long tradition, revitalized through "re-activation" and imbued with presence and life (above all through the use of his own children as models), becomes a sign of a positive and hopeful vision of the future capable of leading beyond change and crisis alike. The artistic gaze directed toward figures like the Tegernsee farm boy has existed, exists, and will continue to exist—even in the age of AI.

Encompassing both figuration and abstraction, Oliver Osborne uses repetition, as well as tweaks in composition and chiaroscuro, to excavate new images from sustained, often art historical fixations. In this sense Osborne explores painting's malleability over time, as well as its relationship to the personal—his subjects range from recognisably appropriated figures of portraiture to his own family. Spanning such variations as silk-screen, monochromatic abstraction and photorealistic oil painting, the artist's practice is never constrained. And although he may paint a singular subject multiple times, each rendition is never the same.

Selected solo exhibitions include: *Der Tegernseer Bauernjunge*, Paulina Caspari, Munich, DE (2026), *The Sleeping Guard*, ICA Milano, IT (2025), *Ooh!*, Union Pacific, London, UK (2025), *Comic Sans*, Francis Irv, New York, US (2025), *Botticelli*, Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, DE (2024), *Manganese Blue*, Galeria Pelaires, Palma de Mallorca, ES (2023), *Recent Painting*, Tanya Leighton, Los Angeles, US (2023), *Mantegna's Dead Christ*, Union Pacific, London, US (2022), *Portrait of a Fat Man for Düsseldorf*, JVDW, Düsseldorf, DE (2022), *Der Kleine Angsthase*, Braunsfelder, Cologne, DE (2020), *Birth, Education, Leisure, Death*, Giò Marconi, Milan, IT (2019) and *Bonnie*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, DE (2018).

Selected group exhibitions include: *Oliver Osborne & Shimon Minamikawa*, Seishodo THE ROOM, Kyoto, JP (2024), *I Would Not Think To Touch The Sky With Two Arms*, Paulina Caspari, Munich, DE (2024), *Meet me by the lake*, CLEARING, New York, US (2024), *A GENTLE CRUISE*, JVDW, Düsseldorf, DE (2024), *Nine Oils*, Francis Irv, New York, US (2024) *Day by Day, Good Day* (curated by Ted Targett), *Union Pacific*, London, UK (2022), *Triple Burner*, *Union Pacific*, London, UK (2021), *HEART–100 artists, 1 mission*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, DE (2020), *Editions*, Peles Empire, Berlin, DE (2019), and *The Go Between* (curated by Eugenio Viola), Museo di Capodimonte, Naples and Sprovieri, IT (2014), amongst others.