

FRIEZE

"The Soothing Effect of Oliver Osborne's Paintings"

By Moritz Scheper

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At Braunsfelder, Cologne, a series of painted rubber plants speaks to our need for calmness

Not so long ago, depictions of house plants were pervasive in art. In the post-internet age, they served as a metaphor for a digital existence in which you could access the world without going beyond the four walls of your home. This fascination with foliage echoed Henri Matisse's obsession with creating decoupage plants in the 1940s, after ill health and diminished mobility in later life threatened to compromise his artistic productivity. It's worth bearing these art-historical precedents and the links to the visual culture of the online age in mind, when viewing Oliver Osborne's latest exhibition, 'Der kleine Angsthase' (The Little Scaredy-Cat), at Braunsfelder.



Oliver Osborne, 20.6.2020, 2020, oil on linen, 54 x 48 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Tanya Leighton, Berlin, Giò Marconi, Milan, and Braunsfelder Family Collection, Cologne

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Complimented by a selection of earlier pieces, the core of the show features a suite of 14 paintings of rubber plants (all 2020), which is part of an ongoing exploration of this subject that Osborne started in 2013. The seriality of these works is evidenced not just in the subject matter but in their dimensions and titles, all of which take the form of dates. Presumably, these indicate when each painting was completed, but the naming convention also plays with the idea of the works being the product of a single day. This links them to both On Kawara's 'Today' series (1974–2014), in which the artist documented the date in a painting every day until his death, and Peter Dreher's 'Day by Day, Good Day' (1974–ongoing): daily depictions of the same simple glass of water.

As well as addressing the theme of time passing and painting as labour, Osborne's works demonstrate conceptual stoicism. Painting variants of a motif conveys a certain wit, but the insistence of this approach generates meaning beyond truisms about the beauty of the mundane. Rather than an emphatically natural depiction, the overlapping rubber-plant leaves, rendered in photorealist perfection, resemble a digital composition – an effect amplified by the vanilla-coloured void of the background. Fittingly, around half of the paintings in the series feature a greenish grid behind the leaves, like a cross between a garden trellis and the guide matrix in design software. It's here that Osborne's fascination for digital imagery is most evident.



Oliver Osborne, 20.4.2020, 2020, oil on linen, 54 × 48 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Tanya Leighton, Berlin, Gió Marconi, Milan, and Braunsfelder Family Collection, Cologne

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Certain arrangements of leaves migrate through the series as if copied and pasted from an earlier version. The dense foliage of 20.4.2020, for instance, recurs in trimmed form in both 10.5.2020 and 25.5.2020. In the latter, however, the greens are warmer and the brushwork slightly less sharp, almost as if a filter has been laid over the original image. In the background, the painterly smoothness of the plant's shiny leaves is broken open as the fishbone pattern of the support shows through. In stark contrast to this emphasis on the canvas, the leaves are covered with a moiré, as if this were a technical image. On closer inspection, however, the moiré turns out to be the embossed pattern of hearts from a paper towel that has been carefully pressed into the oil paint before it dried.



Oliver Osborne, 2.6.2020, 2020, installation view, Braunsfelder, Cologne. Courtesy: the artist, Tanya Leighton, Berlin, Gió Marconi, Milan, and Braunsfelder Family Collection, Cologne

Two rubber-plant works in the show depart somewhat from this serial rigor. In 2.6.2020, a cat is integrated into the foliage, hinting at the widespread fascination for cat memes. In 22.2.2020, the leaves withdraw towards the edges of the frame, leaving the centre mysteriously empty. This depiction of emptiness suggests that Osborne touches the painterly problem of representing the non-representable. An issue famously recognized in Antonio da Correggio's ceiling fresco *The Assumption of the Virgin* (1530), in which impenetrable clouds point towards God. Knitting all this together, Osborne's synthetic compositions of calming green house plants, a pet cat and the (absent) divine may all point to the basic human desire for love and comfort. Seen in this light, each work in the series acts as a soothing aesthetic construction designed to alleviate the viewer's mood.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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