



**A Base Note of Hysteria: A Review of Albert Oehlen
and Kim Gordon at Corbett vs. Dempsey**
by Jennifer Smart | January 31, 2025



Albert Oehlen and Kim Gordon, "Omega #1," 2023, enamel on aluminum with sound equipment, 144" x 191"/Photo: Robert Chase Heishman

On Gagosian's artist page for Albert Oehlen they include a quote from the artist: "Qualities that I want to see brought together: delicacy and coarseness, color and vagueness, and, underlying them all, a base note of hysteria."

It's a fitting description for much of the work Oehlen has created over the course of his career. Although he has worked in a variety of media, he is perhaps most well-known for paintings that marry Abstract Expressionism's gestural, violent brushstrokes with surrealism's organic forms.

In the artist's fifth show at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Oehlen collaborated with Kim Gordon on the production of three works that unite his painterly and sculptural instincts with Gordon's musical history.

The exhibition is comprised of three aluminum-paneled works that dominate the main gallery space. The works are installed along the walls and their shapes mirror one another, each comprised of four pieces of cut aluminum, pieced together like puzzle pieces to resemble omega, the last letter in the Greek alphabet.



It's a symbol rich with power, associated with ideas of the ultimate or the end. Oehlen's works are more phallic than the typical omega shape, crowned by bulbous curves that narrow as they descend to the base, one side of which is starkly rectangular, the other side comprised of less rigid lines.

It is hard not to associate the works with modern manufacturing—even the manufacturer's codes are still faintly visible on the surface of the industrial material—but Oehlen has marred their commercial perfections with splatters of red and blue paint. The lines are not particularly thick, some are just faint traces of color, a mess of swirls and squiggles that shift between the two primary colors.

After constructing the panels, Oehlen invited Gordon to make soundtracks for the work which are “played” by sonic transducers attached to the back of each of the aluminum panels. Gordon's angular, aggressive playing is a fitting accompaniment to the metal objects but only plays intermittently in the gallery, erupting out of nowhere to fill the space. Like the paint applied by Oehlen, Gordon's playing is improvisational, shifting between sustained drone, pummeling, grating chords, and moments of gentler scrapes and rustles. Not at all a wall of noise, the recordings move in stops and starts, more like a soundscape than a musical score, and the sound quality is more visceral for its poorness. To record the sound she used the metal plates and their attached transducer as an amplifier for her otherwise unplugged electric guitar. The effect is of her instrument straining despite its power.

It's an effort that is mirrored in the speculative relationship the viewer is encouraged to create between object and sound. When the sounds erupt from the walls, it is as if the aluminum pieces are laboring to be understood. At times the vibrations of sound literally cause the panels to shake and shudder, adding another sonic dimension to Gordon's playing. Non-representational art and noise music both work on a visceral level. They are modes of creating that are interested more in evoking feeling than comprehension. Oehlen says he's after hysteria. Hysteria is certainly one way to make sense of the frantic brushstrokes and distressed guitar of these pieces, but, to my mind, the more powerful sense is one of straining. When brought together here, Oehlen's sculpture and Gordon's music traffic effort and labor. By adding another means of communication, sound, to what would have otherwise been silent works of visual art, these works express desperation as much as power, as though the two forms hope that in their collaboration they will finally be understood.