



FIG. 1 Installation view of *David Ostrowski: Test* at the Perimeter, London, 2026, showing *Untitled (Letters)*, by David Ostrowski. 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Stephen James).



FIG. 2 Installation view of *David Ostrowski: Test* at the Perimeter, London, 2026, showing *Untitled (Letters)*, by David Ostrowski. 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Stephen James).



FIG. 3 Installation view of *David Ostrowski: Test* at the Perimeter, London, 2026, showing, both on the left and right, *Untitled (Letters)*, by David Ostrowski. 2024. Acrylic and dirt on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Stephen James).



FIG. 4 *Untitled (Letters)*, by David Ostrowski. 2025. Acrylic, lacquer, paper, cotton and tape on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Mareike Tocha; exh. the Perimeter, London).



FIG. 5 Installation view of *David Ostrowski: Test* at the Perimeter, London, 2026, showing *F (Chuzpe)*, by David Ostrowski. 2016. Acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Stephen James).



FIG. 5 Installation view of *David Ostrowski: Test* at the Perimeter, London, 2026, showing *F (Chuzpe)*, by David Ostrowski. 2016. Acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 240 by 190 cm. © David Ostrowski; courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers; photograph Stephen James).

David Ostrowski: Test

by Daniel Sturgis
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Upon entering *Test*, the solo exhibition of David Ostrowski (b.1981) at the Perimeter, London, one is confronted by *Untitled (Letters)* FIG.1. It is a large canvas, nearly eight feet tall and six wide, which depicts two bold black letters: an upper- and lower-case T. Suspended above head height, the painting is attached to the railings of the balcony that overlooks the gallery's entrance, blocking the visitor's view and hemming them in. Although simply showing large Helvetica letters on a white ground, it – and indeed all of Ostrowski's works – has a scuffed or worn quality. Unlike the rarefied interior of the converted mews house in which it is shown, the work's surface is far from pristine. This, however, does not mean that Ostrowski's quasi-abstract paintings are not elegant. For they are, not only compositionally – in their minimal simplicity and attention to detail – but in their spent, melancholic reverence to past traditions of painting.

It is significant that Ostrowski chose the typeface most redolently associated with international modernism in this work. Other paintings from the *Letters* series also employ Helvetica, occasionally spelling out a cropped but discernible word, such as 'Test' FIG.2 or 'Text' FIG.3. In a related *Letters* painting, Ostrowski appropriates the red-and-white signage of the German DIY store Bauhaus, a nomenclature that, like the painting, tests – as in the exhibition's title – modernist hierarchies. In these works, the block-like letters are painted on raw cotton duck canvas that has been stretched, with anti-fit precision, to incorporate the odd wrinkle. Their surfaces are lightly stained with dirt and betray the very occasional, delicate, ultra-fine drip or smudge of paint and colour.

Ostrowski's practice is characterised by a serial approach, and the grouping of works here – dominated by the *Letters* series – creates a kind of mini-retrospective. In other works from *Letters*, the rudimentary characteristics of a single character are created by spray-painting with lacquer. Or, in more painterly works, such marks are combined with bold strips of parcel tape. In one FIG.4, hung on its own in the basement gallery, Ostrowski has fragily constructed an approximation of the letter 'U' using a decisive vertical line of fluorescent tape and a more organic curve of soft blue spray paint. By over-painting areas in white and collaging canvas offcuts, Ostrowski has created a layered and complex surface. The painting is riddled with satisfying details, such as the small imprints of circles pressed into the ground, which are reminiscent of the ring that a mug or cup might make on a hard surface when its contents have been accidentally spilt.

Ostrowski studied painting at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the early 2000s, where he was taught by Albert Oehlen (b.1954). It is hard not to frame his practice within a specific lineage of German painting – one that stretches back to Martin Kippenberger (1953–97) and Sigmar Polke (1941–2010), and which embraces what Oehlen would come to describe as 'post-non-representational' painting. This tendency sought to deconstruct painting to its constituent elements by foregrounding its material constructs and ciphers from its history. However, unlike the artists of the French Supports/Surfaces group, for example, who shared similar motivations, in Oehlen's and to a lesser extent Ostrowski's hands, such deconstructions are raw, wilfully 'bad' and unpolished. They display a targeted anti-style that aims to puncture any association with ideas of heroic mastery, the Teutonic high seriousness associated with German Neo-Expressionism or indeed the messianic legacy of Joseph Beuys (1921–86), who also taught at Düsseldorf.

For Oehlen and Ostrowski, this deconstructive impulse is built less on the French post-structuralist theories that motivated Supports/Surfaces than on a knowledge of the early avant-gardes, especially Dada and Surrealism. In Oehlen's words, Surrealism was able to 'lever' or distort past art – to break and bend it – and thereby create a space 'to make [new work] with as little effort as possible'.¹ Ostrowski cites a similar desire for economy, noting that he 'strive[s] to trigger the greatest possible affects, with the least possible means'.² Whereas Oehlen typically employed such transgressions in maximalist and anarchic paintings, Ostrowski displays a decidedly more minimal and less chaotic vision. In this respect, his sensibility aligns with a particular strain of post-minimal abstraction associated with such New York painters as Ted Stamm (1944–84), Alan Uglow (1941–2011) and Steven Parrino (1958–2005), who managed to combine their punk attitudes with painterly elegance.

This connection is most evident in *F (Chuzpe)* FIG.5, with its nonchalant use of black spray paint. The four lines that spread across the canvas are reminiscent of the paintings of Martin Barré (1924–93) – an artist who, like Ostrowski, took particular care in how his works were installed and displayed. The *F* in the work title has often been interpreted as a stand-in for *fehlermalerei* ('failure painting'), a prefix that governs an ongoing series of canvases Ostrowski began in 2011, two of which are included in this exhibition along with a related work on paper. The word '*chuzpe*', which refers to a brazen audacity – a quality clear in the painting's making – is Yiddish in origin, seemingly a poignant nod towards the artist's own heritage.³ The poverty of the sprayed lines, in their material and compositional inadequacy, coyly echoes Theodor W. Adorno's famous assertion that it is 'barbaric' to make art or 'write poetry after Auschwitz'.⁴ This position is perhaps counterbalanced by the painting's low-fi refinement. It therefore offers a conceptual repositioning, one that Ostrowski seems to recognise when he states, again by way of Adorno, that he finds his own vocabulary 'stupidly comforting'.⁵

In the first-floor gallery is one of Ostrowski's few representational paintings, which depicts an owl FIG.6. Although the artist has depicted a variety of owls in previous works – from the carefully observed to the cack-handed and cartoonish, and in singular or multiple groupings – here he has painted just the head and yellow eyes of one bird. Traces of other owls are hidden and overpainted in the white background; the mute eyes of the wise bird stare out at the viewer. These *Parliament Paintings* take their title from the collective noun for a group of owls – a term with political and anthropomorphic associations, and which originates from 1950s popular culture, first coined by C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56). It is this word – and bird – that offers Ostrowski the chance to embrace a retro-kitsch style of laid-back representational painting. These paintings lack the worn-out elegance of the *Letters* and *F* paintings, and they draw from dumb and transgressive bad painting traditions, but they nonetheless share the sense pathos that haunts this exhibition: an emotional charge that in the hands of Ostrowski seems indicative of our age.

Exhibition details

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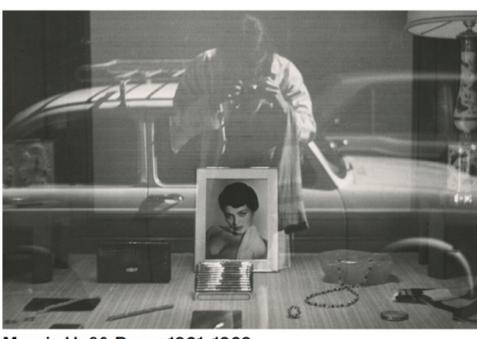
About the author

Daniel Sturgis
 is an artist and a professor in painting at University of the Arts London. His solo exhibition *In the Spirit of Cooperation* will open at Luca Tommasi Arte Contemporanea, Milan, in Autumn 2026.

Footnotes

- 1 Albert Oehlen, quoted from interview with Glenn Brown at Gagosian Gallery, London (5th February 2016), available at glenn-brown.co.uk/video/#/28, accessed 10th March 2026.
- 2 David Ostrowski, quoted from interview with Andrew Woolbright, *The Brooklyn Rail* (July/August 2024), available at brooklynrail.org/2024/07/art/David-Ostrowski-with-Andrew-Woolbright, accessed 10th March 2026.
- 3 Ostrowski's grandmother was the Polish-Jewish writer and holocaust survivor Krystyna Żywulska.
- 4 T.W. Adorno: 'Cultural criticism and society', in *idem: Prisms*, transl. S. Weber Nicholson and S. Weber, Cambridge MA 1983, pp.17–34.
- 5 David Ostrowski, quoted from Woolbright, *op. cit.* (note 2).

See also



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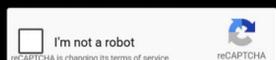
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