Laura Owens

Press Packet

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FRIEZE

Laura Owens Paints What She Wants and Takes Pleasure in Doing It

At the Cleveland Museum of Art's contemporary art outpost, Transformer Station, the artist teams up with a group of teenage curators to present works that celebrate the enthusiasm of childhood artmaking

BY **GRANT KLARICH JOHNSON** IN **EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS** | 18 MAY 21

Deploying local teens as part of its curatorial team, the exhibition 'Laura Owens: Rerun', at the Cleveland Museum of Art's (CMA) contemporary-art outpost, Transformer Station, suggests that Owens and her teenage interlocutors – Jamal Carter, Xyhair Davis, Skylar Fleming, Yomi Gonzalez, Joseph Hlavac, Agatha Mathoslah, Arica McKinney, Maya Peroune and Deonta Steele (members of CMA's arts mastery programme, Currently Under Curation) – were a sympathetic pairing. Owens, who draws from colouring-book pages and deploys paint with exhilarating freedom, has borrowed from and alluded to the spirit of childhood artmaking in her paintings for several years. As such, 'Rerun' has recruited possibly the most fitting local experts to interpret Owens's *oeuvre*: adolescents for whom the memory and material culture of childhood is not a matter of decades ago but mere months.

‘Rerun’ surveys Owens’s professional practice from the 1990s to the present, highlighting earlier pieces such as *Untitled* (1995) – a tongue-in-cheek painting of a gallery, its far wall crammed with tinnily sketched paintings above a vast and foreshortened panelled floor – and her more recent *Untitled* (2016), a large-scale work incorporating thick swabs of paint and screen-printed details of embroidery and children’s illustration. Owens also incorporates her own, never-before-presented, high-school artworks throughout the show. From the innocent naïveté of a ponytailed tennis player to a groovy palimpsest of numbers and letters rendered in marker pen (both *Untitled*, 1987), it’s an honest move that renders this already-relatable artist all the more approachable and real.

The exhibition is split between the two wings of Transformer Station. In the first, larger gallery, paintings by Owens are displayed alongside a precise selection of objects from the museum’s education art collection: a miscellanea of items distinct from the institution’s permanent collection designed to circulate within Cleveland-area schools. Selected from more than 10,000 options, this tiny sampling hints at the editorial interests of Owens and her curatorial team. Blocks for fabric printing, Mexican ceramic tiles, a cross-stitch embroidery sampler and two ceramic vessels shaped like a parrot and a frog, respectively, are united not only by their role in the education collection but also their historically disenfranchised status as objects of museological value. Much like Owens’s paintings, these finds point to themes of decoration and craft as well as the gender issues these aesthetic impulses reflect on, including démodé notions of female domesticity and the creative innovations of women artists. Ultimately, they furnish touchstones for understanding Owens without recourse to a Eurocentric, male-dominated history of painting.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1995, acrylic, oil, enamel, marker, and ink on canvas, 183 × 214 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photography: Douglas M. Parker Studio

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic, oil, Flashe, and screenprinting ink on linen, 274 × 213 cm. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photography: Jorit Aust

If the first gallery adheres to typical modernist conventions of exhibition design (i.e. white walls backgrounding evenly spaced, autonomously presented objects), the second gallery dissolves such divisions and aforementioned hierarchies by mixing the elements presented separately into a glorious synthesis of colour, pattern and appropriated imagery united by the handmade wallpaper of *Untitled* (2021) crafted specifically for the show. Here, thanks to Owens's unique blend of digital and analogue imaging and printing technologies, the animal vessels attributed to the Chimu and Moche peoples of the pre-colonial Andes break free of their plexiglass display cases, enlarged and duplicated, so as to spontaneously intermingle with other local and global references (including clippings from Cleveland's *Lakewood Ledger* newspaper, cacti and parrots from the Mexican tiles, and thumbnails of paintings by Vincent van Gogh) against a lilac surround.

Committedly rejecting the normalizing effects of conventional wisdom, Owens's art embodies her own radically independent taste. She paints and assembles exactly what she likes and takes enormous pleasure in doing so.

*'**Laura Owens: Rerun**' is on view at Transformer Station, Cleveland, through 30 May 2021.*

Main image: Laura Owens, Untitled *(detail), 2015, acrylic, oil, Flashe, and screenprinting ink on linen, 274 × 213 cm. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg. Courtesy: the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; photography: Jorit Aust*

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MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Laura Owens

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Visitors to Laura Owens's exhibition "Books and Tables" might be surprised to find that the show consists of just that. Although she has been showing her handmade books for more than ten years, Owens has never before displayed them in a solo presentation without an accompanying installation of paintings. In the absence of the latter, the viewer's eyes are pushed away from the walls and down toward the ninety-nine books spread out across six tables. Made in a wide variety of colors, sizes, configurations, and paper stocks, the books each ask for a slightly different mode of engagement. Some pop up, some become animated as you flip them, one folds out into a twenty-foot-long strip, and others just call for the usual page turning. Those viewers who are familiar with Owens's paintings (which probably includes many, given that her midcareer survey traveled to the city's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2018) will find familiar motifs and optical tricks. The cats, horses, bees, newspaper clippings, layered and collaged images, and decontextualized gestural marks are all there, but at a decidedly smaller scale. While the books' groupings are loosely thematic (growth, entropy, music and math, fraud, and van Gogh), each display also has a few tricks up its sleeve. For example, on the entropy table, some books are shuffled around on the wooden surface by an invisible hand (a hidden mechanism involving magnets).

Owens's previous exhibition of new work in Los Angeles was the inaugural show at her space, 356 S. Mission Rd. (now closed after a five-year run that generated controversy for the gallery's role in gentrifying the city's Boyle Heights neighborhood). That 2013 show featured twelve paintings, each eleven and a half feet tall, hung in a proportionally enormous warehouse. More than six years later, Owens has downsized considerably while simultaneously expanding upon concerns at the heart of her practice. Her paintings have always brought attention to the means of their making and have always asked the viewer to move in a little closer (or step farther back) to puzzle over a drop shadow or to try to untangle layers of patterns. She is devoted to attracting not just the beholder's attention but her *participation*. Deborah Kass has described Owens's work as "off-the-cuff casual, but deconstructing formalism."

In this show, Owens heightens visitors' attention to their own embodied participation—how moving from page to page, book to book, affects their viewing experience. Demoting the primacy of the disinterested or objective eye (as high formalists would have it), Owens solicits attention from nearly all of the senses. With this move, she has dramatically reframed her longtime concern with painting's physicality and materiality. In a 2019 book titled *Horses*, for example, I could run my finger across the equine forms, feeling the difference between pencil, pastel, and Flashe paint as I let their microscopic residues accumulate on my fingers. A few books smell strongly of wintergreen. Some tables involve an audio element that fades in and out. A book of cats is full of textured collage elements that beg to be stroked, and a sparkly book about stage magic left specks of glitter on my fingers. A show that emphasizes touching the art could easily lapse into a gimmick, but the decision actually felt refreshing.

View of "Laura Owens," 2019–20.

The exhibition asks viewers to think not only about the way they see art but also about the way they interpret it or locate its meaning. Owens's tables are replete with drawers (sometimes drawers within drawers) that can be opened and explored. Resisting my presumption that there might be something special or revelatory hidden inside, Owens has arranged for the books within to be very much like the ones without. A book on the math and music table depicts a stereotypically moustached detective holding a magnifying glass to his eye. The text next to him reads: HOW QUICKLY CAN YOU BREAK THIS CODE AND READ THE MESSAGE THAT IS WRITTEN BELOW? If the books tell us anything, it's that the point of viewing art isn't to quickly break a code. I spent longer in this show than I expected or intended to, and in that time, thought more about myself as a participant. With her ninety-nine books, Owens foregrounds the seemingly infinite meanings participants create simply by touching, sniffing, and looking.

— *Ashton Cooper*

Cooper, Ashton. "Laura Owens." *Artforum* 58, no. 5, January 2020, p. 219.

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Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Artist Laura Owens makes books unlike any other books you've seen

Part of Laura Owens' installation "Books and Tables" at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles. (Annik Wetter / Laura Owens / Matthew Marks Gallery)

By DAVID PAGEL DEC. 6, 2019 | 7 AM

Last year, Laura Owens went big.

Her midcareer survey, organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, filled six large galleries and a couple of long hallways at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles with more than 60 paintings (and

matching furniture) she had made since the mid-1990s. Flamboyant and grand, the L.A. artist's exhibition went toe-to-toe with billboards, often stopping visitors in their tracks and making us think differently about the image-saturated reality we inhabit.

This year, Owens has gone small.

At Matthew Marks Gallery in West Hollywood, "Books and Tables" presents the handmade books and custom-designed tables Owens has made over the last year. Her quiet, bookstore-style installation turns its back on the eye-grabbing dynamics of social media — and the heavyweight expectations of mural-scaled paintings — to make room for experiences that unfold slowly and subtly, gently and freely, casually and intimately.

On six tables in four rooms Owens has arranged 90 books. Her inventory is extraordinary: Flip books, kids' books and how-to books can be found among beautifully reprinted diaries, handmade scrapbooks and hand-drawn songbooks. Bee, bird and turtle books rest next to books about ants, horses and wildflowers, as well as volumes focused on cats, carrots and cream puff makers.

Forgers, gas lighters and the U.S. president tell their tales in books arranged around bootleg versions of an out-of-print catalog Owens published years ago. Also reproduced on wonderfully textured pages — in a variety of typefaces and ink colors — are ancient treatises about spirits, apparitions and witchcraft, as well as fortune-telling, dream analysis and other magical practices.

Laura Owens' "Books and Tables" installation is at Matthew Marks Gallery through Jan. 25. (Annik Wetter / Laura Owens / Matthew Marks Gallery)

Pagel, David. "Review: Artist Laura Owens makes books unlike any other books you've seen." *Los Angeles Times,* December 6, 2019.

Another detail from Owens' "Books and Tables" at Matthew Marks Gallery. (Annik Wetter/Laura Owens / Matthew Marks Gallery)

Picture books figure prominently. Some feature eye-popping reproductions of advertisements for candy cigarettes, frosted doughnuts and double-decker hamburgers. Others depict ghosts, gravestones and cemeteries in pencil, pastel and watercolor. Owens also employs glitter, sand and coffee grounds to illustrate her one-of-a-kind publications.

Her imagery is similarly freewheeling. Cartoon skeletons, romantic ravens and references to the reality of the Battle of Bataan (and its horrifying aftermath) make for an exhibition that invites the imagination to leap and bound.

There's too much to see. Some of Owens' books include enough drawings, watercolors and paintings on paper to be an exhibition unto itself. Others include audio and video. Still others are bound so beautifully you can't help but think of them as sculptures. That's particularly true of the ones that fold out, like maps or accordions and the pop-up books, which are filled with so many surprises that it's easy to get lost in their nooks and crannies.

That experience — of being free to lose oneself in aimless reverie — is built into Owens' tables. All have drawers that open to reveal more books. Some of the drawers have drawers. Appropriately, and poetically, Owens' drawers-within-drawers house books-within-books.

Pagel, David. "Review: Artist Laura Owens makes books unlike any other books you've seen." *Los Angeles Times,* December 6, 2019.

As you immerse yourself in their details, strange things happen around you. Eight volumes slide slowly across one tabletop, randomly stopping and starting. Dots of light dance across other tabletops, making it seem as if your eyes are playing tricks on you. And videos appear on adjoining walls next to one table, making you wonder if you might be hallucinating.

At a time when the number of bookstores is dwindling, and people seem to race through exhibitions faster than ever, it's heartening — and satisfying — to visit Owens' antidote.

Another of view of Owens' "Books and Tables" at Matthew Marks Gallery. (Annik Wetter / Laura Owens / Matthew Marks Gallery)

Laura Owens 'Books and Tables'

Where: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 Orange Grove Ave., West Hollywood

When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Jan. 25

Info: (323) 654-1830, www.matthewmarks.com

Pagel, David. "Review: Artist Laura Owens makes books unlike any other books you've seen." *Los Angeles Times,* December 6, 2019.

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Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Laura Owens' new MOCA show grasps the perpetual power of taboo

For a 1998 collaboration with artist Jorge Pardo, who fabricated a group of simple bedroom sets, Laura Owens made big, color-coordinated paintings of bees buzzing around hives. (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

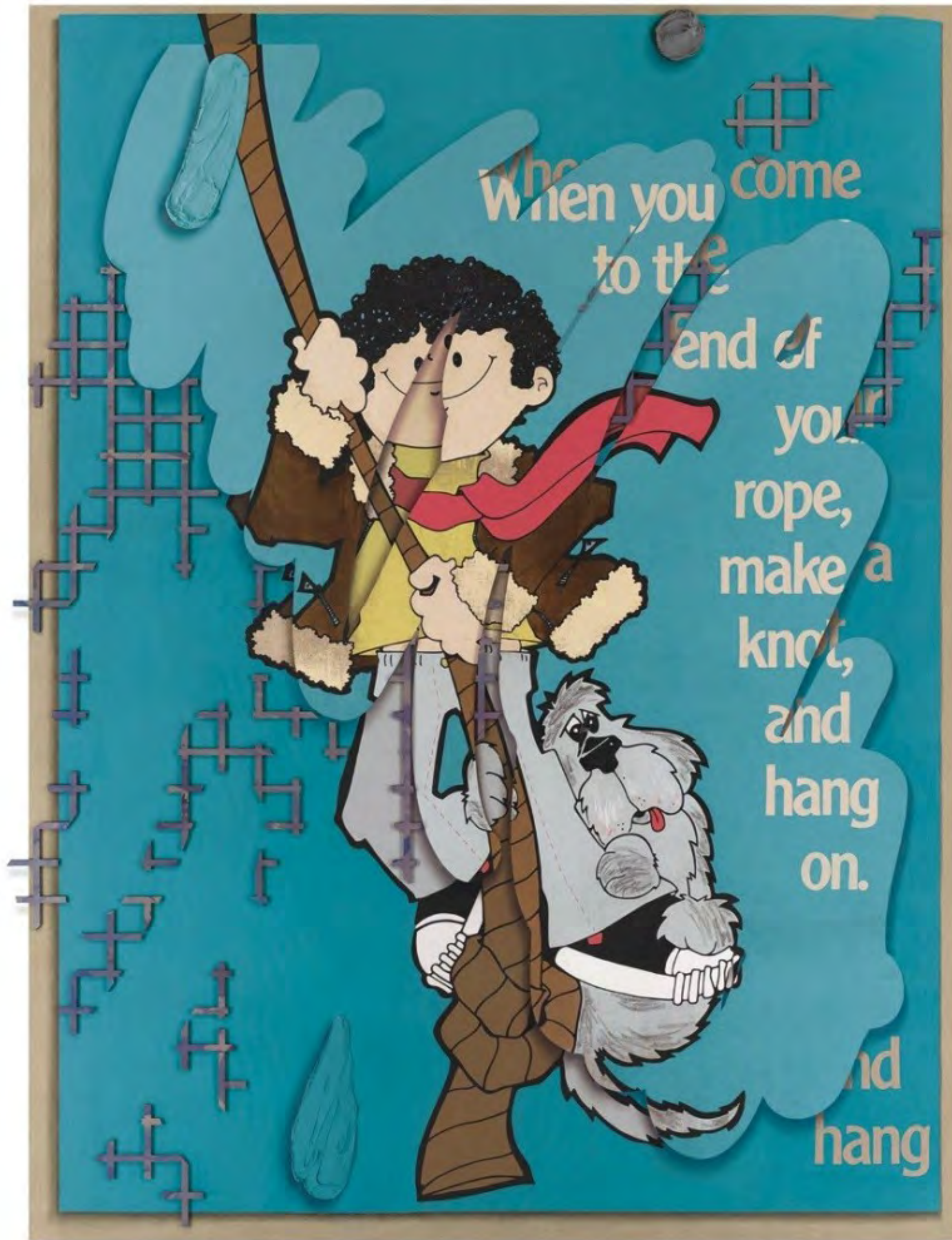
By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT NOV. 16, 2018 | 6 AM

ART CRITIC

Remember when there were three brows – high, middle and low?

The schema was concocted a century ago from phrenology, an inquiry in which racialism and eugenics masqueraded as science to examine the shape and size of the human cranium as an alleged sign of mental capacity. In simplest (and nuttiest) terms: The higher the forehead, the bigger the brow – and the more brains were supposed to be packed inside.

Knight, Christopher. "Review: Laura Owens' new MOCA show grasps the perpetual power of taboo."
Los Angeles Times, November 16, 2018.



Laura Owens, “Untitled (detail),” 2014, mixed media (MOCA)

Two of the three became conventional cues for making and looking at art, at least since cultural critics Russell Lynes and Dwight Macdonald got ahold of them after World War II. In the gruesome wake of Auschwitz and Manzanar, eugenics were scrubbed from the field. Instead, highbrow came to connote a commitment to rarefied refinement, with lowbrow signaling raw vitality.

Each end of the aesthetic spectrum had its fervent champions. (One example is on view at the Petersen Automotive Museum in “Auto-Didactic: The Juxtapoz School,” a group exhibition that features artists since the 1960s who self-identify as lowbrow.) But the big taboo was found elsewhere. The big taboo was middlebrow art.
Highbrow could get an artist into the art museum, while lowbrow could garner rebellious street-

Knight, Christopher. “Review: Laura Owens' new MOCA show grasps the perpetual power of taboo.”
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cred. But middlebrow? A bland vulgarization that waters down the high and flattens out the low, middlebrow was an art of homogeneous mush. Sometimes called midcult, it would get you blithely ignored.

What serious artist could stand that?

Enter Laura Owens, the Los Angeles artist whose thoroughly entrancing midcareer survey is at the Museum of Contemporary Art's warehouse space in Little Tokyo. (It's her second MOCA solo.) In the late 1990s she grabbed midcult by the lapels. She began to make paintings that do not fawn over some supposed virtue of middlebrow culture, but they do grasp the perpetual, ruminative power of taboo. Playing with midcult is playing with artistic fire. She's great at it.

Her gift shows up straightaway, in the first big painting just inside the show's entry.

A giant, 11-foot-tall version of a cheap drugstore greeting card is painted in placid blue with a length

Laura Owens, "Untitled," 2000, acrylic, oil and graphite on canvas (MOCA)

Knight, Christopher. "Review: Laura Owens' new MOCA show grasps the perpetual power of taboo."
Los Angeles Times, November 16, 2018.

of rope winding around a cheerful cartoon drawing of a smiling, mop-haired boy and his droopy-eyed shaggy dog. Even if you have never seen these characters before, you feel as if you have. A conventional bit of life-coaching wisdom provides text: "When you come to the end of your rope, make a knot, and hang on."

Owens has rendered the work as a collection of layered twists. The card appears to have been sliced open from top to bottom along the boy's head, revealing a second, identical card beneath. It's a deftly painted illusion, a reference to his interior life exposed as just a mirror image of his external reality.

What you see is what you get. Painted illusions are quickly upended.

Three big smears of paint, two at the top and one near the bottom, are thick enough to cast actual shadows on the canvas — shadows that are further darkened with additional paint. Material reality on the surface of the painting merges with the material reality of the painting that hangs before you on the wall.

The background to boy-and-dog is painted in two blue shades — similar but different, with the lighter hue seemingly brushed on top of the darker one in the manner of a computer graphic scribble. Its edges are slick and precise, not unkempt and brushy. The space of the painting feels digital, not photographic. The pictorial struggle that plays out on the canvas is not between reality and illusion. Instead, real oscillates with hyper-real.

The surface of Owens' painting sports applied fragments of broken lattice. They suggest a two-dimensional grid — an established formal symbol of Modernist art — but their splintering doubles as a sign that this painting has broken with that tradition. Photography is the language that interrupted the grand tradition of illusionistic painting in the modern era, but now we've moved on from that.

Owens' text even spells it out: This painting is the knot at the end of that rope, so hang on.

The jagged lattice fragments also cast their own shadows across the painting, while a few protrude over the canvas' edges. They throw shadows on the wall of the gallery in which we are standing. It isn't often that a painting functions as installation art, incorporating the actual space it shares with the audience. But this one does, and it's a hallmark of Owens' work.

Born in Euclid, Ohio, in 1970, the artist came of age during a period when installation art was riding high and painting was dragging low. First at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied as an undergraduate, and then at Cal Arts, where she graduated with an MFA in 1994, Owens was up against formidable odds.

In 1998, she collaborated with artist Jorge Pardo on a remarkable installation that today reads as throwing down a gauntlet. He fabricated several bedroom sets — nightstands, vanities, mirrors, dressers and neatly tucked beds — from plywood painted in pale shades of green, tan and orange,

Laura Owens, "Untitled," 2012, mixed media (MOCA)

while she made simple paintings of beehives in color-coordinated hues. Thick loops of acrylic paint, some seemingly squeezed straight from the tube, form industrious bees buzzing around the hives.

The mirrors reflect the mix-up of painting and sculpture, art and decoration, while the subject of bedroom décor injects a domestic element of private bliss into an installation that is professional and public. (Owens and Pardo were then a couple.) Just outside the MOCA gallery, curators Bennett Simpson and Rebecca Matalon have smartly hung Owens' large-scale reworking of a small but similarly domestic-professional/public-private image – this one showing two tousled Parisian prostitutes cuddling in a cozy bed, lovingly painted by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec on a humble piece of cardboard in 1893.

The bedroom collaboration is a site for restorative experiences. Art-as-lifestyle is wittily upended. The beehive decorations slyly evoke the hive mind – a shared effort that can go one of two ways, producing either uncritical conformity or collective intelligence.

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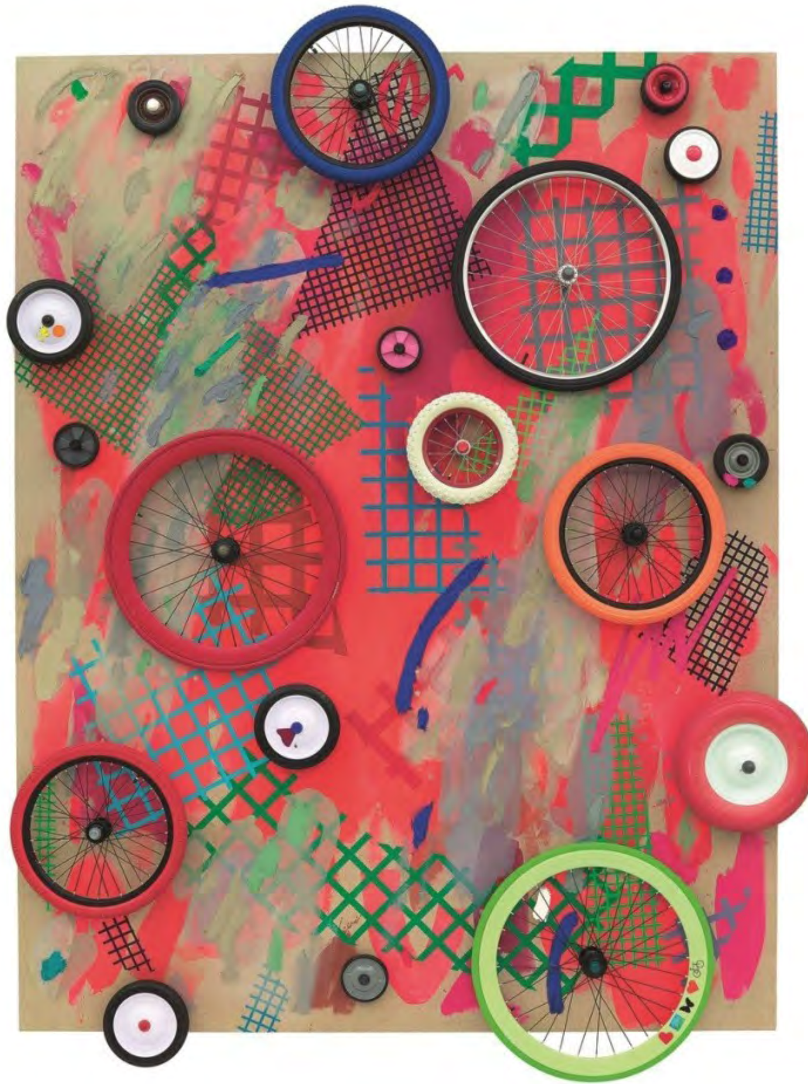


Laura Owens, "Untitled," 2013, mixed media (MOCA)

Owens' range of invention, material and conceptual, is absorbing. The show is not big, but plan on spending time. Her work has sources in textiles, newspapers, greeting cards, art, embroidery, Chinese scrolls, folk art, wallpaper and more. Almost all of them are associated with the home, which Owens reconfigures for institutional display.

Paintings of the alphabet are less like austere riffs on Jasper Johns than like something from a child's bedroom, where the letter S wraps around an owl, the edges of both stitched with yarn, and the letter M is marked by yarn loops in pink, raspberry and tan. The clinical distance created in a silkscreen painting of now-obsolete classified ads for personal relationships, whether long-term or one-night-stands, adds poignance to the yearning desire expressed in them.

A recent painting of broken grids is covered with 18 brightly painted wheels in assorted sizes, from wagon to bicycle, crossing Marcel Duchamp's Dada high jinks with a thrift-store junk assemblage

that might be expected of an anonymous folk artist. A silk-screened list of "amazing facts" is certainly amazing, but once you start getting into it, artistic questions around belief are raised. True or false: "Apples, not caffeine, are more efficient at waking you up in the morning. Marilyn Monroe had six toes. Adolf Hitler's mother seriously considered having an abortion but was talked out of it by her doctor. Pearls melt in vinegar."

The traveling show, organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, ranges from the mid-1990s to the present. (With about 60 works, it has been slightly trimmed from its New York presentation.) The 664-page catalog is short on the usual features of an artist's monograph, including an exhibition checklist, which disappointingly reduces its usefulness as a record of the splendid undertaking.

Instead, most of it is a mélange of the pack-rat artist's correspondence, clippings, snapshots, short reminiscences from friends and former teachers, gallery announcements, brief essays, exhibition photographs and more. Together they add up to a casual, surprisingly detailed Owens biography that, without an index, is meant for pleasurable browsing.

The catalog is a scrapbook, in other words, which left me wondering: Is there anything more middlebrow than scrapbooking?

The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 152 N. Central Ave., Little Tokyo, (213) 621-2766, through March 25. Closed Tuesday. moca.org

Frieze

Reviews /

Laura Owens

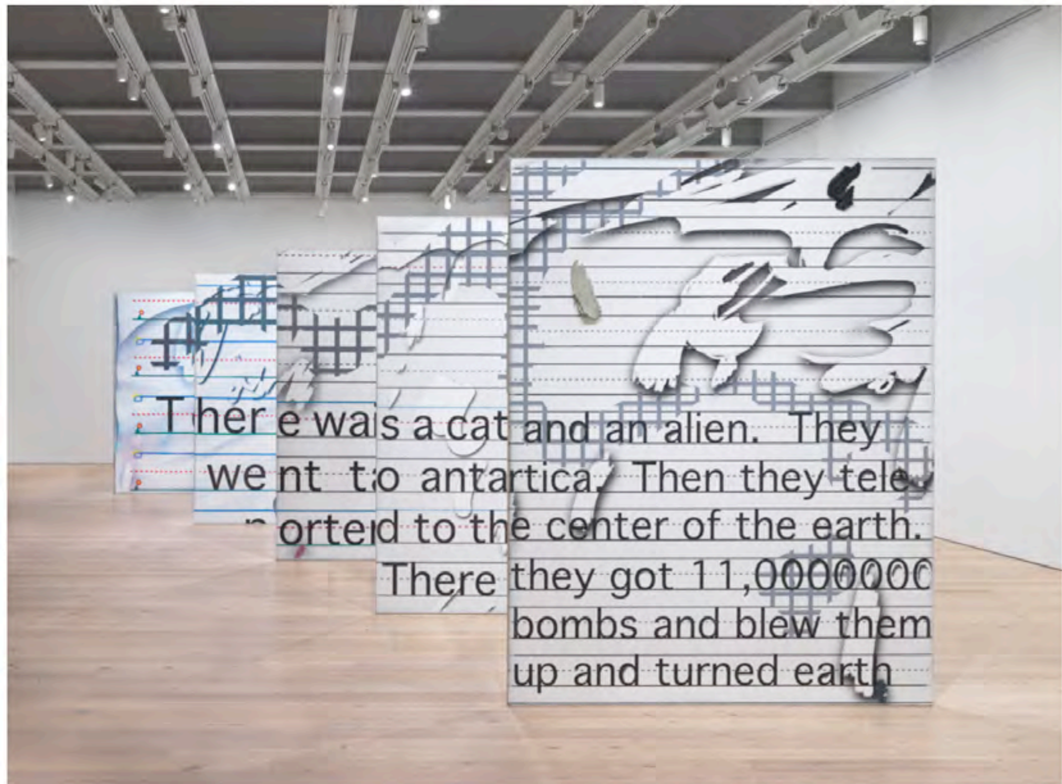
BY ANDREW DURBIN
22 JAN 2018

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA

In 1993, when Laura Owens was a first-year student at the California Institute for the Arts, Charles Gaines completed a 'mentor's report' of the painter's progress in her MFA. He assessed Owens's work in three concise sentences, imploring her to make her voice 'clearer' so that the programme might gain a better sense of 'what the objects meant to you.' 'I think you are close', he concludes, 'but there is an edge that needs to be exposed yet.' Nearly a quarter of a century later, we may now think of Owens as a painter of the exposed, deckled, broken and blunted edge, on occasion of her untitled mid-career survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. There, 60 paintings spanning three decades provide a funny, even exuberant riposte to the drab tidings of the current moment, with humour and roseate flare. Owens 'has always had a particular relationship to the edges', *frieze* contributing editor Kirsty Bell writes in 'On Laura Owens' Idea of Edges', an essay included in the exhibition catalogue. 'She seems congenitally disposed to overstep them.'

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2000, acrylic, oil, and graphite on canvas, 1.8 x 1.7 m. Courtesy: Collezione Giuseppe Iannaccone, Milan, © the artist

At the Whitney, Chief Curator Scott Rothkopf has arrayed a substantial view of Owens's sidewinding career, including extended quotations of the artist's exhibitions dating back to the 1990s, that runs along those edges the artist has sought to define and erase through a doodling, comic sensibility. Emerging in California at a moment when painting was viewed with suspicion at CalArts, Owens reinvigorated the medium 'by appearing not to take it too seriously', as the museum declares in an introductory wall text. From this, the Whitney tracks Owens's development from early efforts, such as *Untitled* (1995) – a wonky painting of a salon-style room of pictures, seen from the point of view of 'an insect or small child' – to more recent work. From *Untitled*'s grasshopper vantage, the distant works-within-the-work are mostly vague and abstract, made by friends and family who dropped by Owens's studio. The painting was exhibited in the artist's first solo show that same year, and its roundabout inclusion of friends established early-on the artist's preoccupation with a dreamy, recursive seriality that came to define her work as well as the importance she has placed on collaboration and friendship.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint on linen, with powder-coated aluminum strainer; five panels, 2.7 x 2.1 m each. Courtesy: Capitain Petzel, Berlin, collection of the artist; photograph: Ron Amstutz

Part of the success of Owens's playful style arises from the seriousness with which she approaches the dense network of internal references – from Modernism to IKEA-like installations – that link individual works and exhibitions. Paintings indirectly reflect or nod to other paintings, hint at separate bodies of work, peers, forebearers and even lovers. Several early installation works, for example, were made in collaboration with the artist Jorge Pardo, whom she dated in the '90s. In *Untitled* (1997), a darkly rendered still-life, one catches a glimpse of another painting (also untitled, and from that same year) in a small scuffed mirror placed upon a wooden table beside a vase of flowers. Later paintings recall one another through recurring motifs, like bespectacled monkeys, or clocks, as in 'Untitled' (2011–12), a series of 61 x 61 cm paintings – first exhibited at The Finley, a small gallery in the stairwell of an apartment building in Los Angeles – that feature a number of rotating clock-hands that do not tell actual time. Or rather, they tell only of Owens's time: a sort of Mad Hatter's hour of pinks and purples and blues, funny faces, flowers and abstraction, all of it stoned on florid enthusiasm.

The clock paintings run along the tops of walls at the Whitney, occasionally diverging from the well-lit gallery spaces, where several freestanding enclosures create multiple narrow passages between rooms, into shadow, down corridors, inviting us to chase them into the half-dark. This line of paintings provides one path around the show, and one that foregoes chronological linearity and, moreover, alters the usual course set for the museum-goer's eye by demanding that we look up before we look ahead. Several paintings – particularly later works, when Owens turned to the

figure in 2000 – have been hung high or salon-style, providing a see-saw arrangement of cute kids and contortionist horses and pretty medieval scenes that repeatedly divert the exhibition's expected sightline.

In a series of 2.7 x 2.1 metre, digitally-manipulated paintings first exhibited at Sadie Coles in 'Pavement Karaoke/Alphabet', Owens skirts the edge between flatness and dimensionality by upending both: looping arches, each 'made entirely on the computer and then physicalized' (per Calvin Marcus, a studio-assistant quoted in the catalogue), layer in great, excited whirligigs across

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 1.7 x 1.8 m. Courtesy: © the artist; Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

screen-printed newspaper want ads. Brushstrokes appear to have been partially created, and then erased by, Photoshop. 'She cites modernism in pinks and blues', Gaines remarked in another progress report at Cal Arts, and the works of 'Pavement Karaoke' might be read as slyly condensed synopses of modernist painting that combine the early collagist experiments of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque of the 1910s – where the difference between actual mixed media and the illusion of such is blurred against an occasional newsprint backdrop – with Henri Matisse's vibrant cut-outs of the 1940s.

Owens's big paintings shrink the viewer down, returning us to that grasshopper's vantage point established at the outset of her career in *Untitled* (1995), before her recent canvases of cats and cartoon figures cribbed from 1970s children's storybooks. In more recent work, that view might be better understood as a child's, given the importance of motherhood to the artist's practice, evinced by Owens's many paintings of her children and the inclusion of family photographs in the exhibition catalogue (including one of her daughter, Nova, grinning before *Untitled*, 2008, which depicts a nude mother and child). One feels kid-sized in awe of the swirling, curious world these paintings capture, as if they glimpse askance adulthood: a tumbling fleet of cats; a crescent moon smiling at a clutch of stars, like wallpaper for a baby's room. In another large work, a cartoon boy and his dog cling to a rope – and beside them, the caption reads: 'When you come to the end of your rope, make a knot, and hang on'. Much of Owens's language nods to children's books. 'Untitled' (2015) – a series of free-standing paintings of a handwriting practice book – spell out an incomplete story: 'There was a cat and an alien,' it reads, 'They went to antarctica. Then they teleported to the center of the earth. There they got 11,000000 bombs and blew them up and turned'.

We might imagine, 22 years since Owens represented a child's perspective of a gallery of pictures in *Untitled* (1995), the child is the artist herself, standing in awe of painting's seemingly endless possibilities: its smeared language of history, its frayed, even uncool reputation, its openness to anything. Its open mouth, its full-lips, its kissy flirtations, its gobbling hunger: painting that swallows, swallows one whole. And brought down to the floor-level in *Untitled*, one imagines Owens went to feed the beast only to find herself its meal.

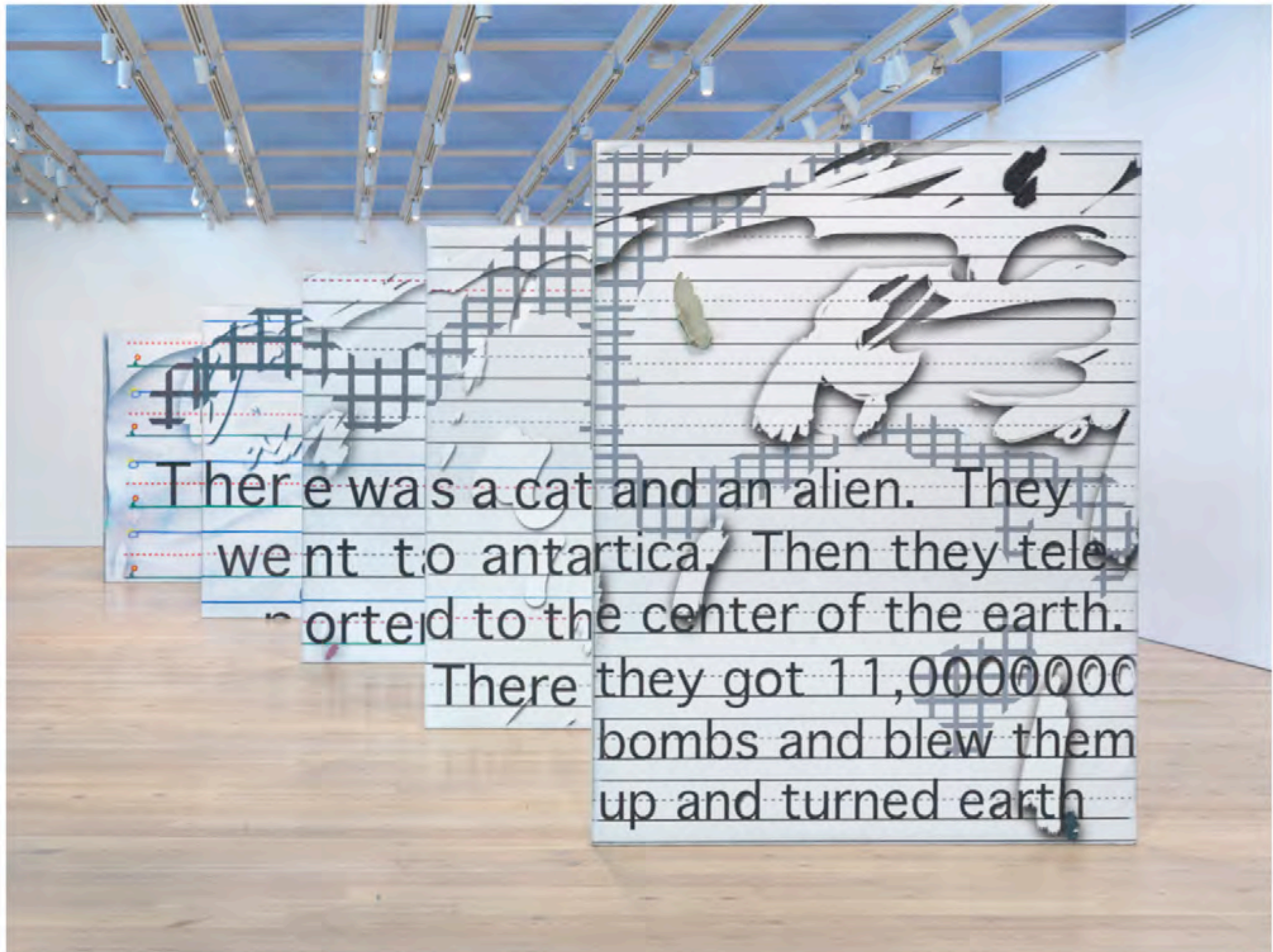
Main image: Laura Owens, installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017-18. Courtesy: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photograph: Ron Amstutz

ARTnews

REVIEWS

The Sky Is the Limit: Laura Owens Is in Top Form in Superb Whitney Museum Retrospective

BY ***Phyllis Tuchman*** POSTED **01/04/18 11:20 AM**



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint on linen, with powder-coated aluminum strainer, five panels, 108 x 84 inches, each, installation view.

Laura Owens's mid-career survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art is a game changer. The 70 or so paintings on view provide a first-rate, in-depth consideration of an artist who's had a loyal following since the mid-1990s. The well-paced installation smartly allows museum visitors to experience many works in re-creations of the spaces in which they initially were displayed. Even the wall labels shine—they are articulate and insightful. And the dictionary-sized catalogue, a hefty tome that's a cross between a scrapbook and an oral history, is an instant classic.

Tuchman, Phyllis. "The Sky Is the Limit: Laura Owens Is in Top Form in Superb Whitney Museum Retrospective." *ARTnews*, January 4, 2018.

As for Owens's paintings, they are rambunctious, ingenious, undogmatic, sassy, and forthright. Like Alexander Calder, Owens never has lost sight of her inner child. A 47-year-old Buckeye who's lived in Los Angeles ever since enrolling at CalArts in 1992, she belongs to a generation that doesn't believe that the making of abstract or representational art is mutually exclusive. For her cohort, Clement Greenberg is a historical figure, not a power broker, and distinctions between high and low art aren't as clear-cut as they once were.

You will find paintings within paintings, and work reflected in mirrors. There are madcap jungle scenes; a series of alphabet paintings with one letter per panel; couples kissing; birds and bees; seascapes and cloudless skies. Owens has been inspired by kitsch, wallpaper, children's books illustrations, and greeting cards. Not long ago, the artist executed a group of abstractions with giant-sized squiggles that are so laden with impasto, they seem sculpted, not painted.

Owens likes sight gags, though some art world cognoscenti might instead prefer the term site-specific to describe this proclivity. Almost 20 years ago, the artist wrote to a European curator, "A large part of the work is what happens between paintings." For example, an untitled canvas from 1999 hangs on a wall outside one of four walk-in spaces constructed for the show. Visible through the doorway is a smaller, less complicated version of the same picture. Nearby, two panels with numbers scrawled across their surfaces from 1999 face each other. The twist is that the numbers are all the same, except on one painting they were inscribed backwards.

Installation view of "Laura Owens," 2017–18, showing untitled works from 1998, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
RON AMSTUTZ

Tuchman, Phyllis. "The Sky Is the Limit: Laura Owens Is in Top Form in Superb Whitney Museum Retrospective." *ARTnews,* January 4, 2018.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1997, oil, acrylic, and airbrushed oil on canvas, 96 x 120 inches.

©LAURA OWENS/WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, PROMISED GIFT OF THEA WESTREICH WAGNER AND ETHAN WAGNER

When she was in graduate school, CalArts in Valencia was a bastion of installation art, and she made her fair share. In the Whitney catalogue, she recalled, "At first I would love my installations, but I'd come in the next day and think they had kind of died. They never had the longevity that my worst unfinished painting did." There was a solution. Eventually, she "decided everything I was trying to do with installation a painting could do."

During the mid-'90s, Owens's work was spare and subdued, though that didn't preclude there being complications. Conundrums abound in her oeuvre. Consider the canvases where she depicts a limited number of representational elements on broad planes of color or bare canvas. The show opens with one of them, an untitled work from 1996, whose rose and yellow ground would not have been out of place in "The Structure of Color," a group show of color-focused abstraction curated by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney in 1971. Except the background is not an abstraction. The pattern of triangles mimics the petals of a flower, inspired by a logo belonging to a man named Rose that Owens had noticed. Completing her canvas, the young artist added several large globs of blue impasto with images of her own studio life embedded within them. Depending on the storyline you prefer, the creamy passages are either teardrops or drops of rain on the petals of a large, expanding rose.

Installation view of "Laura Owens," 2017–18, showing untitled works from 2012, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
RON AMSTUTZ

Around the bend in the Whitney show, there's another untitled painting, this one from 1994, which is divided in half. When the canvas is oriented so that the expanse of blue is on the bottom, it's a seascape. When the pale ochre portion is displayed on the bottom, it's a desert scene. It can be shown either way. Take note, too, of her understated depiction, from 1997, of a sequence of museum galleries with an artist's easel front and center waiting for a painter to copy a masterpiece. That's exactly what Owens, who was inspired by rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago, did, putting her own spin on a van Gogh portrait she admired at the Windy City museum.

Another painting from 1997 illuminates Owens's idiosyncratic approaches to other classic themes and subjects. A large seascape with lots of blue sky and a few soaring gulls also includes several shadows. The dark, cursive marks indicate that the whole scene is reflected in a mirror. Throughout the exhibition, you can notice Owens having fun with all sorts of details. A wall socket resembles the faces of snowmen made with pieces of coal for its two eyes and mouth. A Halloween mask worthy of Freddy Krueger of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* fame hovers in the wings of a bee. If Owens were older, you'd think she once enjoyed looking for the NINAs hidden in Al Hirschfeld's theater caricatures in the *New York Times* Sunday Arts section.

Tuchman, Phyllis. "The Sky Is the Limit: Laura Owens Is in Top Form in Superb Whitney Museum Retrospective."
ARTnews, January 4, 2018.

Owens also has thought deeply and thoroughly about ways to install her art. Ninety-two small panels with mechanical parts and clock motors from 2011–12 are placed side-by-side and wrap around the tops of three perpendicular walls. Looking for 33 panels from 2012 made from acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, charcoal, yarn, and cord on hand-dyed linen calls to mind treasure hunts. Stacked in several tiers, only the top level of the pictures is visible above a wall that hides the rest of the set, all of which are mounted on a wall a few feet behind the one that blocks them. You need to walk through a snug passageway to view the ensemble. Another large group of acrylic and oil paintings from 2004–11 with representational subjects and historical styles is exhibited salon-style in one of the walk-in spaces.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012, acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, resin, pumice, and fabric on canvas, 108 x 84 inches.

©LAURA OWENS/COURTESY THE ARTIST; GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK AND ROME; SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON; AND GALERIE GISELA CAPITAIN, COLOGNE/COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

During 2000, when she had a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Owens was struck by the way the Boston-based collector displayed work in her Beantown palazzo. "This over-the-top installation made me think," she mentioned in the Whitney catalogue, " 'What if I can get all this stuff I'm trying to do with my exhibitions and between the paintings into one painting?' So that your eye is moving forward, sideways, and back into deep space." At the time, Owens tried to achieve this with work featuring lots of "animals to shoot you around, and to let a painting be an autonomous object that can contain the whole idea of space in and of itself—and make you think about deep space and how space gets made." She further added, "I also just felt like I had been relying too much on artwork being born out of the exhibition site."

Holding this in mind is probably the best way to approach the large non-representational panels Owens has been executing since 2012. These canvases, especially the group known as "Pavement Karaoke," are bold, handsome works that exemplify how a new wave of artists is approaching the making of abstract paintings. Instead of appropriating, say, the virtuoso, whiplash thin linear networks of a Willem de Kooning or an Arshile Gorky or the animated, poured skeins of black and white of a Jackson Pollock, Owens, among others, makes immaculate renderings of heroic, gestural brushstrokes. Backed by drop shadows, they practically hover in front of the panels. She takes them down a notch, too, by decorating these super-sized, creamy flourishes with stars, dots, and other extraneous marks. And, she has silhouetted these floating marks against the most unlikely of backgrounds: yards of collaged gingham cloth, the kind once identified with hearth and home

in the form of aprons and tablecloths. Some works also incorporate want ads (seeking, among other people, a carpenter or a photographer) and other public notices of the kind that formerly filled the pages of local newspapers across the country. It's a surprising place to find reading matter! But the artist has used these texts much the way she once deployed paintings within paintings, constructing a painting that connects to other places and forms of media.

In the catalogue, Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's chief curator and co-curator of this mid-career survey, points out that the "Pavement Karoke" series involves a "variety of techniques and materials." They were far more complex to make than they appear to be. In addition to the collaged sections, Owens used silkscreens to apply the personnel ads and sought advice from a paint chemist before creating the brushstrokes. For Rothkopf, one of the best curators around, these works are "gutsy, assured, and urgent."

At this point, the sky's the limit for Owens, and these days, she appears to be exploring collage. The last section of the show reveals a variety of ways she's doing this. A work from 2013 with spoked bicycle, stroller, and go-kart wheels of different sizes hovering above colored grids feels animated even though nothing moves. Think Hans Hofmann push/pull mashed up with Robert Rauschenberg. On the eighth floor, an installation piece involves five standing panels whose text can only be read when a viewer stands in just the right spot. More recent works from 2016 incorporate sound and have touches of color in the form of small, inset representational panels that contrast with pixel-like black and white wallpaper mounted on aluminum.

Not many solo shows make you wish you could see into the future. This is one of them.

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Art in America

MAGAZINE Jan 1, 2018

Moving Targets

by Nancy Princenthal

Laura Owens: Untitled, 2012, acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, resin, pumice, and fabric on canvas, 108 by 84 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

CAN PAINTERS HAVE a social practice? Even when they get into the weeds of formalism? The Los Angeles–based artist Laura Owens makes a convincing argument that both answers are yes—but it's complicated.

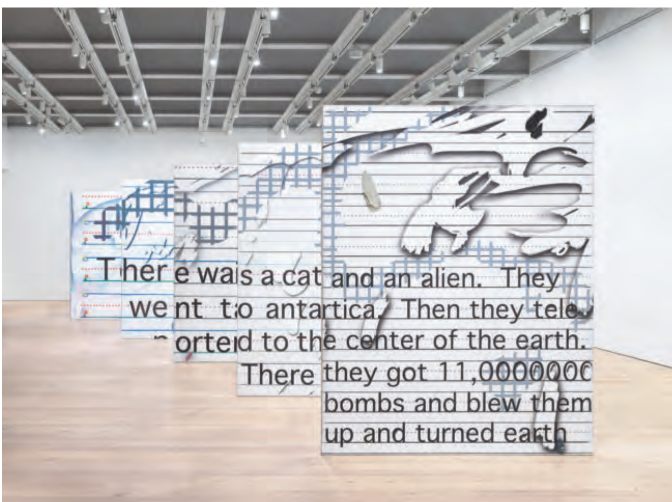
For Owens's big, blooming survey at the Whitney Museum, curator Scott Rothkopf went all-out to support her desire to have images communicate with each other, with works by fellow artists, and with the building's architecture; a custom configuration of the fifth floor includes temporary galleries proportioned to re-create previous installations.

The largest works, from the last few years, are dazzling. Super-smart, clean and bright, and a little chilly, they bounce viewers around like a trampoline, drawing you in close, pushing you away, and encouraging you to see connections among recurring motifs and self-quotations. Often, they sport layered, fragmented grids, the heavier—in paint application and color—generally on top. The weightiest strokes of all, great galumphing Ab-Ex-style swooshes of thickly applied paint, are (in two ways, both good) like frosting on the cake; most swooshes are further emphasized with sharply illusionistic painted shadows, some eyeballed, others created digitally, as is much of Owens's imagery. Acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint as well as charcoal and solvent transfers come into play, along with fabric, yarn, vinyl stickers, and wood. Spontaneity is calculated with care; rather than working in the moment, Owens relies on preliminary sketches and tests (and assistants).

In a quintet of cherry-red paintings from 2012, riven by various fractured grids and furious blue, black, and green scrawls, the materials include resin and pumice. Little brown clumps are scattered like astral dust across surfaces

View of the exhibition “Laura Owens,” 2017–18, showing two untitled series of mixed-medium paintings from 2012. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Ron Amstutz.

Untitled, 1997, oil, acrylic, and airbrushed oil on canvas, 96 by 120 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art.



Untitled, 2015, acrylic, oil, and vinyl paint on linen with powder-coated aluminum strainer, five panels, 108 by 84 inches each, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo Ron Amstutz.

composed in part of screenprinted classified ads lifted from a ’60s underground Berkeley newspaper. Although not identified as such, these five paintings—untitled, like all of Owens’s works—are from an exhibition called “Pavement Karaoke.” In the original hanging, at Sadie Coles HQ, in London, the show’s title could be read across the full group’s seven canvases, even though parts of letters fell between the cracks. With the suite now split up by sales, the encrypted message is further obscured. We are invited to wonder, without prejudice: is there any there there?

ASKED RECENTLY to comment on Helen Frankenthaler, Owens hailed the “almost infinite” background space that the Color Field painter created.[1] Owens does the same. There’s a lot in front of her work’s surfaces, and even more behind them, but the picture plane, storied locus of high-Modernist abstraction, tends to disappear. Sometimes, the effect is expressed as a joke. One crisply executed 2014 canvas is intruded upon, at the bottom, by a skanky little gray mouse, peering into a deep black mouse hole.

If Jonathan Lasker’s graphic grids-plus-sculptural-squiggles seem one point of reference for Owens, Roy Lichtenstein’s freestanding brushstrokes are another. Abstract Expressionism first met Pop in the person of Jasper Johns, whose alphabets surely lurk behind Owens’s letter-based paintings of 2012. (Hung high in a narrow, unlit corridor, these thirty-three small square canvases are first visible over the back wall of the gallery in which the “Pavement Karaoke” paintings are installed.) Pop notes are also clear in a recent painting flaunting valentine-red hearts, and in two others featuring a children’s book character whose pipe-shaped schnoz sends forth a fountain of lemonade. A much-reproduced painting acquired by the Whitney from its 2014 Biennial features a Hallmark-card-like cartoon of a little boy accompanied by a dog, and by the hand-lettered bit of advice when you come to the end of your rope, make a knot, and hang on. Tough love, and Owens means it. If her paintings are sometimes sweet, they are never ingratiating—but neither are they as cynical as, say, Richard Prince’s (to cite another artist who favors cartoons). The surface of this painting is a nested series of highly illusionistic crevasses and canyons, including one that splits the boy’s wide grin even further. The trellis fragments scattered across the canvas, though, are made of wood. Extending past the

Untitled, 2000, acrylic, oil, and graphite on canvas, 72 by 66½ inches. Collection Giuseppe Iannaccone, Milan.

painting's side on the left, they draw our attention to the fact that the turquoise ground stops short of the canvas's edges and has a shadow to suggest it's a painting upon a painting—except at the upper right, where it gives itself away with a slightly ragged, painterly edge.

A couple of recent paintings feature wheels, a single wheel in one, lots in another, alluding to the action-painting proposition that formalism can be downright athletic while also nodding to the drily conceptual pleasures of Duchamp. Owens takes both ideas a bit further in a series of ninety-two small square canvases, a few with moving parts that might mark time, run high along the walls of several galleries. Writes Owens, the clock idea "opens up many linguistic twins. For example the hands of a clock, hand of the artist, face of a clock/portraiture." Plus, by providing literal "temporal experiences," these paintings reiterate the "temporal experience of looking at a painting, seeing it from the side, far away, up close." Found in the marketplaces of both mass production and craft, a clock (like any other everyday thing) "allows a painting to expand its own linguistic edges and points to our limited definitions of what a painting can be."[2] Owens has similar thoughts about books, as is reflected in this exhibition's catalogue, a lavish 664-page scrapbook of layered images (few of them legible reproductions of her work), short essays by assorted writers (mostly reprinted), personal statements and letters (including some heated exchanges with various gallerists), and miscellaneous documents, the whole amounting to a compound of social history and biography. Each book, in a run of 8,500, has a unique cover; customized upholstered benches throughout the exhibition have rectangular impressions that accommodate sample copies. "A book can stand in for a work of art, and be just a book at the same time," Owens says.[3] If this catalogue, like Owens's many previous publications, belongs in the venerable tradition of books that constitute artworks, it also participates in a newer trend toward exhibition publications that are as physically imposing as they are light on scholarship. As was, for instance, the highly designed book that accompanied Kai Althoff's 2016 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which featured tipped-in and interleaved plates on several kinds of paper stock, as well as surprisingly pointed exchanges between artist and curator), there is very little in the way of reasoned assessment of the work.

On the positive side, Owens's paintings are enlivened by her interest in the inherently serial nature of books, where meaning accrues page by page, and in the way type can give way to abstract graphic patterning. "What do you think about when you read the words in the painting?" she asks. "How are they different from the didactics on the wall telling you my name, the date, and the lender? Where is the painting?"[4] It's a good query for a work from 2015 in which five floor-mounted panels (installed almost alone on the eighth floor) are staggered such that each partly obscures the one behind it. From a single vantage point, you'll discover a text running continuously from one to the next. It reads: there was a cat and an alien. they went to antartica. then they teleported to the center of the earth. there they got 11,0000000 bombs and blew them up and turned earth. (The punch line, into a pizza crust, appears in an unobtrusive little still life hung on the far wall.)

Clearly sprung from the mind of a child (specifically, Owens's son, Henry, now twelve; she also has a nine-year-old daughter, Nova), this apocalyptic little tale is confidently lettered on an enlarged version of the dotted- and solid-

lined paper schoolkids use to learn penmanship. But stand before an individual panel and the words complete differently—cat becomes category, “antartica” is transformed to antagonizing—yielding a more adult and intransigent kind of absurdism. (A view of another set of images on the panels’ backs, a composite still life of sorts, is also adapted from a drawing by Henry, on loose-leaf paper, of various tasty things, all labeled, including “cherries,” “licorice,” and “cinnamon bun.”) Along with a particularly vivid challenge to painting’s physical coherence, there are a number of ideas in play here. One is that meaning falls apart if you get too close. Another, that kids take up an incredible amount of space. A third might be that reproductions take all the fun out of seeing art.

Words also have a place in three paintings that are extracts from a 2016 installation at CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco for which Owens created black-and-white wallpaper featuring a host of digitally randomized and fragmented letters and numbers. Amid drifts of tiny black squares compressed from print, and also legible sheets of text (horoscopes, news blasts), there were eight telephone numbers to which viewers were invited to text questions. At the Whitney, a single telephone number, listed on a wall label, delivers recorded answers to texted queries, as before, prompted by keywords in the question; responses are drawn from interviews Owens has given, as well as sound clips, snippets of commercials, and other sources. In San Francisco, one question yielded a bonus: the show was called “Ten Paintings,” and although none were on hand in the traditional sense, if you texted “where are the paintings?,” the answer “here” bounced from one speaker to the next, all around the room.[5] My own questions at the Whitney produced noise, rap music, and (in reply to “why horoscopes?”) a repeated request for my star sign. I replied, and was greeted with a short discourse in a language I couldn’t make out, and a sharply heightened little blast of the kind of paranoia (the walls have ears!) that has become all too familiar.

IN A 2003 INTERVIEW, novelist Rachel Kushner asked Owens why she chose to be a painter. “Early ideas and impressions about community,” she answered, “and the type of community I wanted to be in, and the type of thinking I wanted to do.”[6] Nearly a decade ago, David Joselit proposed a way of talking about painting as a social, relational activity. He began by quoting Martin Kippenberger, who asserted in 1990, “simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important! . . . When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it.”[7] Bringing Jutta Koether, Wade Guyton, R.H. Quaytman, and Stephen Prina into the discussion, Joselit introduced “transitivity” as a term for work that “moves out from painting-as-cultural artifact to the social networks surrounding it.”[8] Thomas Crow had said something similar, if bleaker, more than ten years earlier, writing that the art market had become “to a great extent, an economy of services more than of goods. A primary value that the well-placed client receives . . . is participation, insider status and recognition.”[9] These are admittedly academic perspectives, and are focused as much on hierarchies of power—“institutional critique”—as on the horizontal “social” networks they also name. While Owens is hardly blind to questions of power within the art world, the transitivity her work can be said to represent tends toward the lateral, convivial kind. A 1997 exhibition titled “Sharon Lockhart, Laura Owens and Frances Stark,” at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, was billed as “an investigation into the nature of discourse and dialog among friends.”[10] Stark contributed a drawing, Lockhart a photograph, and Owens a painting; each work was 48 inches square. A box of photocopied studio notes, postcards, personal photographs, mixtapes of favorite music, and video clips was produced during the show’s run in an edition of forty-eight and exhibited at its conclusion. More than any single approach to art-making, it was the three artists’ shared interests, many of them extracurricular, that the exhibition highlighted—and, simply and irreducibly, their friendship.

“Public Offerings,” an exhibition curated by Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los

Angeles, in 2001, addressed the relational dimension of this generation of LA artists even more directly. As Lane Relyea wrote in the show's catalogue, for these artists, including Owens, "the real isn't manifested in any single, inscrutable material object. . . . Rather it inheres in strings of relationships, in the tenuous and intimate connections that make up an artist's scene or the ecology of his or her practice, in the interlocking and occasional slippage of components within those systems, and in their dense circulation of information (of objects, people, money, press camaraderie, gossip)."[11] The hum of these voices is background music in all of Owens's work.

BORN IN 1970 in Euclid, Ohio, Owens spent her undergraduate years at the Rhode Island School of Design, but describes her education there as stifling; the whole painting program, she says, was against thinking and reading. Countering some dearly held assumptions about where such activities are valued, she headed to Los Angeles for graduate school, completing an MFA at California Institute of the Arts in 1994. There, too, she was a contrarian, this time resisting the reign of Continental theory (Baudrillard, Deleuze). Owens remembers the Conceptualist Michael Asher, who was on the faculty, responding to a painting made by fellow student Monique Prieto with the observation, "I see you've taken this cloth and wrapped it over this wooden structure." Prieto and Owens became friends; both dropped Asher's class. Owens continued producing sculpture and installation work; Prieto says her friend, like others in the school, was "painting secretly."[12]

Owens's early paintings tended toward whimsy. Among the best known is a 1997 seascape in which a few glossy stripes of deep blue at the bottom indicate a placid ocean, and a couple of shorthand, V-shaped birds wing their way across a baby-blue sky, on which they cast—believably, so still and perfect is the scene—airbrushed shadows. In the Kushner interview, Owens responded to the question, "Where do the bad feelings go?" by saying, "There's a space of personal freedom for me where my art-making happens. . . . It's a space that has its own properties, and they don't have to do with happy or sad or any of that. I would never say to myself, 'Okay, let me go into this space of freedom in order to show you about the pain I have.' . . . I'm not in the space of freedom if I'm in pain." And further, "I actually just don't feel that my negative or desperate or hopeless ideas are that interesting." Her point is well taken. It is only decent—and in contemporary culture, generous and bold—to acknowledge privilege and resist inflating ordinary grievances.

In several paintings from the mid-'90s, canvases regard each other coyly, as when an anomalously dark still life shows up in a more characteristically bright rendering of an interior, where the still life is one of two obliquely positioned paintings-within-the-painting. Among the earliest works at the Whitney is one picturing a sharply receding interior with dozens of tiny paintings crammed into the visible strip of a far wall, some of them executed by friends of Owens. (Among the embedded paintings is Owens's own spumoni-colored mini abstraction. A bigger but otherwise identical version of this confectionary image hangs alongside.)

Collaboration continued. One gallery is given over to an installation created in 1998 with Jorge Pardo, his tasteful suite of high-modern, earth-tone and blond wood furniture paired with her quartet of color-matched paintings of bees and beehives. Mirrors multiply the reflections. Not in this show is a work co-authored with Scott Reeder in 1999, a painted "diptych" of a giant tree whose leafy top half was installed in a ground-floor space and its bottom, of roots and burrowing animals, in a gallery below. At the opening video monitors offered live feeds of each space to the other, but there was also some prerecorded footage, just to mess with attendees trying to decide where the action was.[13]

A two-panel painting from 1999, composed of numbers of varying sizes written in thin squiggles of paint,

some of them backward, introduces a shift to a more conceptual kind of abstraction, and also affirms the influence of Sigmar Polke, evident in much of Owens's work. Polke's 1967 painting Solutions V, which consists of a list of alternative math facts (2+3=6, 4=4=5, etc.), reminds us how easy it is to create fiction with numbers. The two panels of Owens's painting are hung face-to-face across a short hallway, mirroring each other—figures that are backward in one face forward in the other—and leaving us in a looking-glass world of shifty integers.

In 2000 Owens made her first paintings of living beings (apart from those notional seagulls). Her subjects included a couple in bed, a tender, skillful image after a painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and then, soon, a host of animals: pretty ponies, beguiling monkeys, and a lascivious green-eyed cheetah. Some are awkward (the cheetah), some precise but naïve. In a lovely painting from 2002, a range of animals, from butterflies and birds to a bear, lie more or less hidden in plain sight, as they tend to do in nature. One intimate gallery is packed with such work, varied in scale and degree of sophistication. There is a large, moony seascape, dark and glittering with little hot-pink stars; also, several amorous couples, and a battle scene that seems to have been lifted from the Bayeux Tapestry. At the end of the decade, Owens turned to the hybridized abstraction of her current work, in which many of the impulses she'd followed before—toward naive figuration and wry conceptualism, and toward meaning that accrues across objects—come together.

IN 2012 OWENS signed a lease for 356 South Mission Road, in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. An enormous building, it once warehoused Liberace's pianos. She has used it to stage performances, screen films, and host artists' residencies, youth workshops, and exhibitions. It also houses an outpost of Wendy Yao's store, Ooga Booga, which sells books, clothes, and multiples, and stages events. Yao and gallery owner Gavin Brown, who represents Owens, are partners in maintaining the space (which remains a rental). Owens's studio is next door. For an artist who thrives on setting her own boundaries, and who likes white-knuckling deadlines and otherwise stressing out dealers and curators, the arrangement would seem to offer benefits all around.

Clearly, 356 South Mission is not a novel proposition. From the artists who ran coop galleries of the 1950s to Michelle Grabner curating her Suburban exhibition space near Chicago and beyond, painters, sculptors, and performers have served as impresarios and cheerleaders for their friends. In the concluding essay to a book that begins with an article on the artist collective Tiny Creatures, which thrived briefly a decade ago in LA, Chris Kraus writes, "There's no such thing as a failed utopian community," since "collectivity arranges itself around a desire," essentially to become something other.[14]

However modest, this utopianism fails to convince some of Owens's neighbors in Boyle Heights, who have protested the gentrification they say the Mission Road project helped instigate. (Kraus, an LA landlord herself, has drawn opposition too.) Resistance followed Owens to New York, where there were protesters against gentrification on hand the night of her opening. Owens responded with a written statement defending her commitment to providing a social good for the community. As the Whitney's staff knows well, museums have recently been sites of political action more often than at any time since the late 1960s and early '70s.[15] This is mostly good. But as is often the case these days, the artists and the activists seem to be talking past each other.[16]

That's particularly so, perhaps, when the art at issue seems to turn its back on the political world. What critics offer often in defense of abstract painting amounts to proclaiming its unique sincerity—the argument is that good painting is, perhaps singularly, unironic in its quest for transcendent perceptual experience. In a talk

about painting's prospects this fall, curator and writer Glenn Adamson wondered if there wasn't a position between inhabiting an idiom unselfconsciously and appropriating it. He proposed ownership,[17] which is nicely positive, if a little static. I think what motivates a painter as agile as Owens is keeping the target moving. Though some forms of abstraction solicit a long, meditative gaze, we all know that in social situations, staring is rude. In Owens's paintings, the surface won't bear it. Her work's value can't be located in any stable place—in medium or support, form or concept, words or images, figuration or abstraction. It's not handmade or fabricated or digital. It's emergent, as some scientists say about consciousness, and as friends might say about friendship.

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1. Laura Owens, "Artist's Statement," in Katy Siegel, ed., *"The heroine Paint": After Frankenthaler*, New York, Gagosian Gallery, 2015, p. 70.
2. Laura Owens, "Clocks paintings and books," excerpt from application for Art Unlimited, Basel, 2011, in Scott Rothkopf, ed. *Owens, Laura*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017, p. 447.
3. Ibid.
4. Cited in Bruce Hainley, "How Should a Painting Do?," in Rothkopf., p. 138.
5. From a statement by David Berezin, an assistant to Owens, in Rothkopf, p. 594.
6. Laura Owens interviewed by Rachel Kushner, *Believer*, May 2003, believermag.com.
7. Quoted in David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October*, vol. 130, Fall 2009, p. 125.
8. Ibid, p. 128.
9. "Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron: Simulated Abstraction and the Service Economy of Art," *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 81.
10. Press release quoted in Jenny Jaskey, "Flag Girl," in Rothkopf, p. 152. Suzanne Lacy, who basically invented social practice, in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, has always operated like a living Rolodex, or, to be a little more up-to-date, her own social media platform, putting people together in the service of activist projects. California seems particularly nourishing to this approach.
11. Lane Relyea, "LA–Based and Superstructure," in *Public Offerings*, Paul Schimmel, ed., Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p. 255.
12. Statements by the two artists in Rothkopf, pp. 67-68.
13. Other collaborators have included Chris Ofili and Peter Doig, with whom Owens curated a show, and Mungo Thompson, with whom she made a painting of former United States attorney general John Ashcroft.
14. Chris Kraus, "You Are Invited to Be the Last Tiny Creature," *Where Art Belongs*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2011, p. 169.
15. A Dana Schutz painting of the slain Emmett Till sparked outrage at the 2017 Biennial; a subsequent survey of Schutz's work also drew protest at the ICA in Boston. Among other notable recent confrontations is that of Native Americans with the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis over the installation of a piece by Sam Durant in its sculpture garden. The garden is on former Dakota land, and the sculpture, which had a gallows, made reference to the execution of thirty-eight Dakota men. Opposition was also raised against a survey at the Walker of the work of Jimmie Durham, who has in the past identified as Cherokee, which the tribe contests; that survey is now on view at the Whitney, so far without arousing controversy. Protests against gentrification occurred recently at Israeli-born artist Omer Fast's show in James Cohan's Chinatown gallery, where Fast created a false storefront meant to mimic—in a critique of gentrification—those of local Chinese markets.
16. The Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, which calls for shutting down neighborhood art venues, says on its website that it wants such inarguable improvements as affordable housing, emergency housing for the homeless, a laundromat, and a needle exchange and harm reduction center. These are goals that galleries will be less likely to help meet if they're shut down. In her statement, Owens argued that 356 South Mission raised funds for local causes and supported them by donating space, time, energy, and resources. She pointed out that the neighborhood is zoned for light industry, and that she first rented a studio nearby in 1992. Some of her employees live in the neighborhood; they all have health benefits through their work. Owens reported that protesters have issued anonymous insults and death threats (their website provides no further contact information), and refused discussion until she "handed over the keys to them for unspecified purposes." I am a resident of neither Boyle Heights nor Los Angeles, so I'm writing about this from a handicapping distance. But I do believe that artists are not a primary cause for the loss of affordable housing; public policy is.
17. "'Near & Dear' and Material Culture: Artists as Researchers, Glenn Adamson and Sheila Pepe in Conversation," at EFA project space, New York, Oct. 25, 2017.

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THE RADICAL PAINTINGS OF LAURA OWENS

Since childhood, she has grounded her life in being an artist. Along the way, she's forged new directions for her medium.

By Peter Schjeldahl October 23, 2017

Serious but friendly, a woman who rarely jokes but readily laughs, the Los Angeles artist Laura Owens, forty-seven years old, was pleasantly dishevelled in mom attire: shirt, baggy shorts, sneakers, big glasses. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes," she said to the children in each of the five classes she spoke to on Career Day, in June, at her nine-year-old daughter Nova's public elementary school. She accompanied the advice with a PowerPoint slide of herself after falling from a low scaffold and being splattered with blue paint from a pail that had followed her down—a studio mishap, in 2013, that an assistant had paused to snap before helping her up. The next slide showed her paint-smudged face, smiling—no harm. The kids seemed fascinated but perplexed, as well they might have been. An essay could be written on the semantic distinctions, which Owens had just elided, between mistakes and accidents, and between accidents and pratfalls. I recognized one of the turns of mind that characterize Owens's influential inventions of new things for the old medium of painting to do. I couldn't match it when a fifth-grade girl asked me, as a drop-in careerist, how to become a writer. I said that she was one already, if she was writing. With a thought to Owens, I added that she should carry a notebook around, so that people would see that she is a writer. Owens has grounded her life, since childhood, on being, and being regarded as, an artist. The Whitney Museum's description of an upcoming show of her work there as "a midcareer retrospective" seems superfluous for someone who has never not been in midcareer.

Owens in her studio in Los Angeles: "How do you keep things moving along?"

Photograph by David Benjamin Sherry for The New Yorker

The first slide that she had shown the children was of a drawing she said she had made when she was a teen-ager. It will be included in the Whitney show. Dark and smudgy and heavily worked, it depicts a silhouetted

figure in a jail cell, reaching forward through the bars, which cast long shadows, toward a dog dangling a key from its mouth. The dog appears uncoöperative. She told me that the image may have come to her in a dream, which she has no wish to analyze. The second slide documented a civic-poster contest that she had won when she was fifteen—promoting a county foster-care program for children—in her home town of Norwalk, Ohio. Third, from four years later, came a painstaking pencil copy of a photograph of the Beatles. She demurred when I remarked on her evident early giftedness. "I don't believe there's such a thing as innate talent," she said. "It's about desires and passions that lead to a focus on certain things and seeing the world in a certain way."

For the retrospective, Owens and the Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf have created an astonishing catalogue, both epic and intimate: six hundred and sixty-three pages of reproduced works, critical essays, literary texts, photographs, clippings, memoirs by friends, journals, correspondence, exhibition plans, and ephemera. (Each of the eight thousand copies comes with a unique silk-screen cover, handmade in Owens's studio.) The first major item in the catalogue is a memoir by her mother, Carol Hendrickson, a public-health nurse, who recalls once having casually suggested to Owens, then a teen-ager, that she consider pursuing commercial art or teaching art to children. Hendrickson writes that her daughter "was very upset with me, and tearful, and said, 'Don't you think you'll ever see my art in a museum?' And I thought, 'An art museum? Wow!' So I stopped short for a second and said, 'Well, yes, of course I think that.'" In a journal that Owens kept in her early twenties, she wrote a fourteen-point list entitled "How to Be the Best Artist in the World." Among the dictates: "Think big," "Contradict yourself constantly," "No Guilt," "Do not be afraid of anything," "Say very little," and "Know that if you didn't choose to be an artist— You would have certainly entertained world domination or mass murder or sainthood."

Owens showed the children a slide of an effortful drawing from a life class that she had taken while still in high school. She followed it with mostly abstract works from her years at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, in 1992, and at the California Institute of the Arts, where she earned a master's, in 1994. At risd, she said, "I was so happy to be among people who like to make things"; and, at CalArts, "I learned philosophies and ideas of art right now." She displayed one work that wasn't hers: "The Blue Window" (1911), by Matisse, a still-life set against a landscape. She said, "I love that because it is so very beautiful." But mostly she stuck to themes of enterprise—"Send your poems out into the world," she told a girl who said that she wrote poetry—and resilience. "When you make a mistake, see what's good about it," she said. "Mistakes are little windows into what is possible." She told me that her most productive time for working has always been between ten at night and three in the morning, nowadays often after a multitasking day at her studio in Boyle Heights, just across the Hollywood Freeway from downtown—a low-income neighborhood where she also runs a celebrated art-and-performance space, 356 Mission Road, which has lately found itself a target of anti-gentrification protests. In the hours around midnight, she said, "I get down and focussed. Making mistakes, wiping them off. Really communing. At night, it's a matter of hearing the work, after walking past it all day."

Owens's soft-spoken earnestness held the kids' attention even when she flashed images of complicated abstractions, such as a series, "Pavement Karaoke" (2012), that congregates thick impasto, crisp grid designs, effulgent stains, silk-screen newsprint (from a nineteen-sixties underground paper, the Berkeley *Barb*),

collaged gingham, and fragments of lava rock. But the figurative ones went over best. One, from 2004, was of a cartoonish, gangly horse that appears scrunched to fit onto the canvas. "How do you make horses?" a girl in a class of hearing-impaired first graders asked. Owens said, "I look at a lot of pictures of horses." A teacher suggested a demonstration. On a large sheet of paper, Owens drew three rectangles. In one, she swiftly limned a more straightforward equine. In the others, she rendered a rudimentary mountain range and an owl. "See?" she said. "You can do anything!" The results looked simple and guileless in the way of art by children, but fluent and decisive. (Not easy for an adult to do.) A small boy lit up when, on the spot, the teacher taught him the binoculars-like hand sign for "owl." A girl demanded a mermaid, which Owens drew beside the horse. The drawings stayed with the class when we left.

I first became aware of Owens in 1996, when one of her paintings in a SoHo group show invaded my sleep. The strongest young artists of that time, drilled in critical theory and wielding newer mediums, disdained painting as weak-minded and archaic. Most of the picture "Untitled" (1995), about six feet high by seven feet wide, is taken up by a few red diagonal lines on a pinkish ground. They indicate a floor seen in perspective—or half of one, because the lines converge toward the right edge of the canvas—topped by a triangular slice of mottled green wall spotted with some four dozen tiny abstract paintings-within-the-painting. (Artist friends of Owens had daubed in some of those, at her invitation.) A couple of nights after viewing the work, I dreamed that an annoying young man was pestering me to tell him if paintings by an old woman, perhaps his grandmother, were worth anything. To get rid of him, I gave them a glance. They had an aura redolent of the Owens. I became so wildly enthusiastic that the guy backed away from me. I believe that his qualm crept in when I reviewed the group show for the *Village Voice*. I wrote that Owens's work, although charismatic, was perhaps clever to a fault: "an advancing weather front of tacit quotation marks" and "not beautiful, but 'about' beauty."

I wasn't ready to accept that Owens had hit on a necessarily willful new direction—not exactly forward, but fruitfully sideways—for painting, my favorite art form. She knew the critical challenges, from Draconianly avant-gardist CalArts, and was taking them head on, with crackling wit and a haunted heart. Was new art supposed to enforce awareness of its physical and institutional environs? Owens envisioned an exhibition space, such as the one that you stood in to view her picture. A painting about looking at paintings, from an alienated distance, this "Untitled" is itself a painting to be looked at, as closely as you like. The dinky abstractions, fictively remote, are smack on the surface. Funny, faintly melancholy, and fantastically intelligent, the work somewhat recalls the philosophical cartooning of Saul Steinberg, but vigorously brushed at a commanding scale. I think that there is a figure in the picture, albeit an invisible one. It's the viewer: you, or, in my case, me. I came to see that what I had taken for arch skepticism was strategic sincerity.

Unusually for Owens, the painting was inspired by a specific work of a past artist—"Studio Interior" (circa 1882), a sumptuous piece by William Merritt Chase, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—while not much resembling it. She never imitates a style or, really, has one of her own. Rather, she has adopted craft techniques and teased out iconographic and formal ideas from whole fields and genres of the pictorial. Gestural and color-field abstraction, digital imaging, American folk art, Japanese landscape, children's-book illustration, dropped shadows, greeting-card whimsy, clip art, wallpaper design, silk screen, tapestry,

typography, stencils, recorded-sound elements, and mechanical moving parts (in one series of paintings, shapes with hidden motors function like clock hands) take turns or combine. Slam-bang visual impact co-occurs with whispering subtlety. Owens's art imparts a sense, from first to last, of being in the middle of a process that doesn't evolve but that spreads, deltalike, from a mysterious headwater. However strenuous technically, her work is reliably feather-light in feeling, even at architectural scale. "Ambitious" seems both too heavy and too petty a word for her. Her drive seems impersonal: a daemon, which she hosts. Recently, I posed that notion to her. It seemed to strike her as over the top. She said, "I think about what is required of me."

Owens was a contrarian at risd, chafing at male painting teachers who pushed latter-day variants of macho Abstract Expressionism and condescended to their female students. One of them suggested that the women in his class paint from life, encouraging abstraction among the men. Owens, painting abstractly, organized a club with other dissatisfied students to pursue a curriculum of their own. At CalArts, she imbibed intellectual rigor, including from the late conceptual artist and legendary teacher Michael Asher, who intended his site-specific, temporary works to undermine the conventions of art institutions. (One whole show of his consisted in removing a wall in a gallery to expose the business office.) He discounted painting. Yet Owens took to "using house paint and making a lot of big canvases," she told me, with "giant shapes and then small, concentrated moments of things," such as bits of still-life. You know at a glance that they are by Owens, not from their looks, which are miscellaneous, but from how they feel: vaguely familiar and acutely strange.

Owens took a keen interest in whatever her peers were up to, eschewing competitiveness. "It's debilitating to think that this person is above me and this person is below me. I want to be in a conversation with someone. Why can't I think I'm talking to my favorite painters?" For example? By making a "painting for Cézanne to see," Owens said. What would she and Cézanne discuss? "Definitely paying attention to what each mark is doing." She said of Cézanne, "He is the god of paying-attention-ness." Owens's marks have a secondhand feel—indeed, with ghostly quotation marks, the echt Gen-X finger gesture—but they breathe liberty. ("You can do anything!") The effect has nothing to do with virtuosity. She said, "I don't like somebody fetishizing their skill level. Painting is one of the few mediums—I don't know, maybe cinematography is another—where the skill level can just take over and really seduce people. It's not that I don't appreciate pieces of art that are done well. But how do you keep things moving along?"

Owens told me of her first visit, when she was a young girl, to the superb Cleveland Museum of Art. She saw at a distance an immense color-field painting by Morris Louis and walked toward it. As she approached, "the painting got bigger and bigger and I got smaller and smaller." Add that memory to CalArts smarts and you have a take on Owens's first New York solo show, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, in 1997, and her first in London, at Sadie Coles, the following year. The former featured a vast painting of a blurry seascape with two curly "W" shapes, representing seagulls in flight, which appeared to cast shadows onto the sky behind them. A landscape at Coles was similarly large and customized for the space. (Owens has stayed stubbornly loyal to those two middle-range dealers, and to Galerie Gisela Capitain, in Cologne, despite wooing from richer and more prestigious galleries.) The work at Coles was installed facing a window across a room that had a pillar in

the middle. Owens painted a shadow of the pillar onto her canvas. Both paintings felt as much like places as like pictures, anticipating Owens's engulfing installations of recent years.

Critics were wary. Roberta Smith, in the *Times*, detected "cynicism" in the seagulls painting: "monochrome meets kitsch." But, as with me, her initial resistance gave way as the seriousness of Owens's intentions sank in; Smith became one of the artist's most discerning observers. Meanwhile, certain artists caught Owens's drift immediately. Rachel Harrison, the daring and influential sculptor, recalled for me the Gavin Brown show, with its "thick paint and comical flat shadows": "I found it exceedingly deft formally, while demonstrating that although painting was pretty unfashionable at the time, it was still possible to throw a bomb."

Owens's idea of suiting paintings to sites, in a sort of conceptually self-conscious new baroque, has paid off in such dizzyingly complex recent works as a one-off installation, "Ten Paintings," last year at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco. The paintings didn't exist yet, except in the potential form of concealed panels that shared a continuous surface of room-girdling handmade wallpaper: in effect, a single painting, more than fourteen feet high and more than a hundred and seventy-three feet long, executed in acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, silk-screen inks, charcoal, pastel, graphite, and sand. Non-repeating bitmap patterns, derived from a scanned piece of crumpled paper, underlay passages of newsprint reproductions, fugitive brushwork, a micrographic version of Picasso's "Guernica," and attached whatnots, including a watercolor of a sailing ship by Owens's grandfather, patterns of embroidery by her grandmother, and a drawing by her younger brother Lincoln, who is a chef in New Orleans. Prevailing blacks, whites, and pale blues, with purple accents, imposed a gently rhythmic unity. At intervals on the walls, phone numbers were printed, with invitations to text any question that a viewer might have. The nearest of eight concealed loudspeakers would deliver an answer in a male, female, or robotic voice, to spooky or daffy effect, from a computer that Owens, with technical help, had programmed to recognize a hundred key words. (Imagine an ultra-high-tech Magic 8 Ball.) To the query "Where are the paintings?," all the speakers replied, "Here!"

When the show closed—with no prospect, Owens said, of ever being repeated—the supports were cut out. I saw the results hanging at her studio, each nine feet high by seven feet wide, and terrific: arbitrary fragments of the wallpaper which, owing to the formalizing power of rectangles, feel discretely composed. Cropped, the installation's ambient energies become compressed dynamisms. The works' derivation makes them highly original aesthetic objects. On the model of Duchampian readymades, perhaps call them "made-alreadies": created by being revealed. In the studio, heaps of the surplus wallpaper, like outtakes on a cutting-room floor, awaited possible roles in works to come.

In a vertiginously hilly part of Echo Park, near Dodger Stadium, Owens shares a tidy two-story house, clinging to a steep slope, with her second husband, Sohrab Mohebbi—an Iranian-born writer and curator who works at Redcat, a CalArts-affiliated art center in downtown Los Angeles—and her two children, Nova and Henry (who is twelve), from her previous marriage, to the painter Edgar Bryan, who lives nearby. She told me by e-mail that when she moved to Los Angeles to attend CalArts, in 1992, she was put off by how "dry" a place it is, the climate and architecture "so jarring." "But after two years I felt very differently. Felt easy and

“Untitled,” by Laura Owens, from 1987.

Courtesy the artist; Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

familiar.” Oak, deodar, citron, and pepper trees and capricious gardens crowd up to the stairs and patios around Owens’s house. A sleek building below contains a studio and room for guests.

I was invited for dinner one summer evening. Owens’s mother—who moved from Ohio to Los Angeles eight years ago, and, last year, into a house next door with her second husband, Richard Hendrickson, a retired small-city-newspaper reporter and editor—brought salad. Pasta and sauce materialized amid the comings and goings and breezy chat, in the open kitchen, of Owens and of friends from her capacious circle of artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other creative Angelenos. (“I would be nowhere without them,” she told me.) Two or three times, the frenetic family dog, a rescue mutt named Molly, escaped the house and had to be recaptured. Downstairs, Henry and Nova took turns practicing the piano.

At twilight, we all took a walk—or a hike, what with the hills—a half mile or so to a park and back, in a sort of mood, at once energized and haphazard, that I now associate with Owens. In company, she is cordial and voluble—nice, in a word—but with what often seems a fraction of a mind that is occultly busy elsewhere. The first thing that you notice about her is her gaze, wide-eyed and fixed on you, as if you had dropped from the sky. It takes a moment to realize that you are not obliged to be commensurately interesting. She consumes so

little social oxygen that people around her tend to get a bit high, laughing at anything. She submits to being interviewed as you might to being treated by a trusted dentist: it's endurable and over with soon enough. I found myself repeatedly apologizing to her for the imposition. She seemed not to hear. She was answering questions.

Owens's father died of complications following knee surgery this year, in July. He was a flamboyant attorney, who strutted around Norwalk in a Stetson. Her parents divorced when she was seventeen. She credits her father with having instilled in her a fervent liberalism, which has prompted her to engage in feminist causes and in campaigns for Democratic candidates, but which is only rarely and obliquely expressed in her art. Raised Catholic, she left the church in rebellion against its anti-abortion doctrine. I was startled when, in her car one day, as she drove us between gallery shows, her usual mildness gave way to flaming rage. We had seen a policeman hassle a young guy whose offense, it appeared, had been to cross a street so lackadaisically as to impede the cop's car for a few seconds. "That is so like them!" she said of uniformed authority. She told me a maxim imparted to her by her father: "Never tell the police anything."

But Owens adores rules, even, or perhaps especially, trivial ones. In an interview with one of her close friends, the novelist Rachel Kushner, in 2003, she described a summer job that she had had when she was seventeen: checking trucks hauling trash and garbage into a landfill. She recalled, "I had the power to say, in a logical and non-emotional way, 'You can't deliver that without a tarp over it.' People would get frustrated and respond, 'What do you mean? You want me to just pull out of here, put a tarp on, and then come right back?' I would look at them and say, 'Yes, that's what you'll have to do if you want to dump your trash—it's the law.' It had its appeal." An anarchic stickler: that's Owens.

Owens can be certain that her Echo Park house was built in 1942, because a renovation, in 2013, discovered paper stereotype plates (used to cast lead cylinders for printing) of the Los Angeles *Times* from that year. They had been employed as flashing beneath the shingled exterior. Transferred to silk screens in a complex procedure involving monoprint molds, the antique reports of distant war and of local events, and the commercial and classified ads, now do double duty as text and texture in some of Owens's paintings. The source and content of the plates both do and don't matter to her, it seems. What counts is their specificity, as things distinct from other things that are like them. "All art now is collage," she said to me, with reference not just to cutting and pasting but to the incorporation of methods and images with prior uses. "Heterogeneous in form," she explained. "Against the different paradigm of the Gestalt object, like a Jackson Pollock painting—a single image that jolts you. Now art is all about being constructed out of relationships between parts."

"Say very little," Owens told herself in her early-nineties journal. And, in a way, she maintains that policy, even when going on at length about her art. Her public talks, delivered with an air of professional duty, tend to be remarkably boring. But get her on the subject of another artist and she brightens. She and I discussed by e-mail the country-music paragon Patsy Cline. I commented on Cline's way with the 1952 chestnut "You Belong to Me," rather a high-class number for a country girl: "Fly the ocean in a silver plane . . . Just remember till you're home again / You belong to me." Cline sings it with wondering respect for its decorum, such that the song is no longer about a fancy girl remonstrating with her fancy guy, but about

Cline's imagining of what it's like to *be* such a girl, with such a guy. Owens commented, "She has a way of singing that feels like she is so relaxed and confident, that what she says, it could be anything and I'd believe she meant it but on an even deeper level than the words could convey." That's the very tenor of the borrowed images that Owens paints: not appropriations but vicarious embodiments.

In 2003, Owens became the youngest artist ever to be given a retrospective at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. By that time, she had begun to gravitate from abstraction toward fanciful figurative imagery, loosely brushed. "I decided I needed to bring in the human figure, because it was something that I was leaving out, and to break the habit of working for sites. To push myself." In 2006, she returned to Ohio for a year. She helped her mother buy a new house with a four-car garage, which became her studio, and painted her baby Henry, Edenic landscapes, flowers, and wacky animals, such as the horse that she showed to the schoolchildren. The works often suggest to me the state of mind of a new mother too tired to think while too dedicated not to work. Owens confirmed the impression in an e-mail: "Being a mom and still making art involves absolutely opposite parts of your brain. One is really selfish and the other is absolutely selfless." The domestic turn in Owens's life and subject matter dismayed friends when she returned to L.A. "It was uncool. I was told by many people, 'Well, that's the end of your art career.'" How did that make her feel? "Angered," she said. I think that the gawky pictures were a way for Owens to reconnect with the soul of the girl who had tried to get just right the vision of a figure in jail and a sassy dog. She wasn't going to be embarrassed about it.

Owens was asked, in 2003, to contribute to a feature, in *Vogue*, of self-portraits of women artists. She says in the Whitney catalogue, "I said no several times because my work doesn't really deal with self-representation." Finally, she made an insouciant watercolor of herself, seen from the back, standing in a small boat and talking to the sun. A bird perches on a wave, and Owens's dog bobs past on a piece of driftwood. "I sent the image off to *Vogue* and Anna Wintour rejected it." Such occasional offenses to elegant taste may explain a wobbliness in the market for Owens's paintings. Her works sell briskly to devoted collectors but less well on the investment-minded secondary market, which favors reliable product lines. Her peak at auction—three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, at Sotheby's, a year ago—is hardly peanuts, but it lags the millions for works by some of her contemporaries, all stylistically consistent and nearly all male. Even after two decades of growing fame and esteem, her art's values retard transposition into prices.

One day, I met with Owens in her main studio. Consumed by preparations for the Whitney show, she had no special work in progress. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder cashmere sweater, but over a white T-shirt that rather sabotaged the chic. As usual, her long brown hair was pulled up in a knot with no evident advice from a mirror. I watched while she and an assistant, David Berezin, huddled at a computer to color-correct pages for the Whitney catalogue—difficult by computer, she said. "Digital color shoots out. Real color is reflective." Getting the right blue for the sky in a photograph of Owens and a friend on an outing in Death Valley took most of a minute. Other assistants worked at other computers. Phone calls were frequent. Owens Skyped at one point, also about the catalogue, with Scott Rothkopf, in New York, in editorial detail so granular that I almost fell asleep. The studio is like a cross between a factory and a laboratory. One colossal space is equipped with worktables and contains leaning stacks of big, well-used silk screens on heavy metal frames. Another room, merely vast, is hung with unfinished paintings in what seemed a tentative simulacrum

of a museum or gallery show. She said, “I want to see how they look with each other. What works, what doesn’t.” The mismatched paintings on the day of my visit felt like actors at an audition. If someone looked at me the way Owens was looking at them, I’d be scared. Crowded bookshelves, a couch, a large coffee table, chairs, and kitchen accessories furnish rough amenity.

The studio is in a building next door to 356 Mission Road, a two-story stuccoed-brick hulk, built in 1926, that was once a printing plant and then a piano warehouse. It sports a stately corner entrance on a dusty, all but untrafficked stretch of blocks, zoned for light industry, that are quiescent by day and deserted at night. It was vacant when Owens found it, in 2012, while in search of a space as a studio that could also house an exhibition—her first in L.A. since 2003—of works that she would make there. She rented it with support from her longtime dealer Gavin Brown and her friend Wendy Yao, the owner of an avant-gardish Chinatown bookstore, Ooga Booga. The show, “12 Paintings,” installed on a dramatic scale with the austere immensity of the building’s ground-floor space, proved to be more than the sum of its parts. The effect gave Owens the idea, in partnership with Brown and Yao, to make 356 Mission Road a *Kunsthalle*—a non-collecting museum for exhibitions, performances, community workshops (there’s a weekly one in animation, for children), lectures, a branch of Ooga Booga, and fund-raisers for liberal causes (never for itself and never taking a commission). The venue has hosted hundreds of events. Subsisting on sales from shows and, whenever needed, on contributions from Owens, it amounts to a work of art in itself—and, lately, a bull’s-eye for controversy.

A shadowy group, the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, has picketed and otherwise publicly opposed 356 Mission as a symbol of the increasing gentrification of the largely Latino neighborhood. This agonizes Owens. She wrote to me, “I have conducted myself and lived my life as an engaged citizen in my city and my various communities,” and she has empathy for victims of displacements that are “tragic and very real.” Last spring, she sought and got a meeting to discuss the situation with members of the activist group, who proved unbending. “Their single and inflexible demand is that we hand over the keys of the space to them and end 356. It is also very important to them that I ‘leave graciously’ by signing a document saying I agree with all their ideas and I have learned from them.” Subsequently: “All of the staff and our friends have talked this over, asked community members, done research and do not believe we have found any evidence this will result in the reversal of gentrification.” It’s a fact of experience that the appearance of artists and galleries in low-income areas reliably portends rising real-estate values, with dire consequences for many residents. What’s rare in the case of 356, which owns no property and has no monetary investment in Boyle Heights, is the sensitivity of its leader, on the horns of an irremediable dilemma. An adage about the inevitable fate of good deeds springs to mind. So does an unlucky resonance of Owens’s creative disposition.

“A painting seems to never not be art . . . even whether it is sitting on the shelf in the art-supply store or in the dumpster,” Owens said in a symposium, earlier this year, at the Museum of Modern Art, on the heroically perverse French Dadaist Francis Picabia. (Why bother vying to win at a game that can’t be lost?) Analogously, an art space can never not stand for art, whether up your street or on the moon. “Making mistakes is part of the work,” Owens told the children at her daughter’s school. Will 356 Mission turn out to have been a mistake for her? It will be an illuminating one, if so. Conceived in the hope of opening a window of social possibility, 356 may instead have hit a stone wall of political rancor.

Owens said to me, "I really believe in art, that art can do things that other things don't do. It's important to try, and fail, and to believe that things can do things." She is a genius of revelations, along the lines of that premise. She revealed twenty years ago, and has kept doing it, that what seemed a terminally exhausted state of painting could be a garden of unlimited, freshening delights. Now she confronts a larger imbroglio. Does art still, if it ever did, matter beyond the commercial and institutional bubbles of the art world? Can aesthetic pleasures have ethical payoffs, imparting lessons for life? Or does life overrule rationales for art altogether? These are not abstract questions for Owens. They spur her to propositions that, availing or not, solicit dead-honest responses of eye, mind, and heart. ♦

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San Francisco Chronicle

Laura Owens at CCA Wattis Institute a pulse-quickening experience

By Charles Desmarais | May 19, 2016

Photo: Johnna Arnold, Courtesy The Artist And Gavin Brown's Enterprise

The Laura Owens exhibition on view at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts is a pulse-quickening experience. It feels fresh and open — a wide visual expanse with a far horizon. It is a field richly complicated by thickets and rabbit holes — suggestions of places partially glimpsed, hidden and waiting to be explored.

The Wattis Institute's handling of the exhibition, which runs through July 23, may be a case study in how not to make new friends for contemporary art, but we'll get back to that.

Owens' work has received much attention, including major museum and gallery exhibitions, since she received a graduate degree from the California Institute of the Arts in 1994 (she still lives in Los Angeles). She's with hip galleries in New York (Gavin Brown's Enterprise) and London (Sadie Coles HQ), and even created her own (unnamed, influential) exhibition space in Los Angeles with Brown and another partner.

The work has also generated a great deal of writing while pretty much confounding criticism. In shorthand, let's call her a late postmodernist, given her long and deep interest in worn-out images and other cultural leftovers — from children's book illustrations to print advertising to gift wrap — as the subject of her painting.

As smart as her pictures are, they are, blessedly, also great to look at. I prefer the more complicated description provided in a wall label by Wattis director Anthony Huberman, who points out that Owens straddles and "plays both sides" of the supposed divides in painting: between flatness and depth, materiality and illusion, abstraction and representation, epic and everyday, grid and gesture. The simple fact is that she is an original, not subject to such binary distinctions.

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but Owens ups the ante in the new work presented in the Wattis show. Papering the walls with large hand-printed sheets, she has created a vast picture of layers of images in various stages of dissipation. Gaseous clouds of pixels and picture-parts unravel, carrying along image-objects from the artist's past and present like celestial bodies in an expanding universe, or rending in giant tears and splits. It's an all-over work of multiple print techniques, piled one atop another; troweled-on schmears of paint in pastel colors build out physically from trompe l'oeil spaces and structures, all coming together as an environment loosely bound by an irregular grid — faux posts and beams that mimic the supports of gallery walls and ceilings.

It didn't seem that way when you walked in. Then, it was an apparently empty room, so flat on the walls are the images, so high-key the colors and tones. It took a few minutes to orient yourself, to realize that you were, effectively, lost inside the very fabric of a painting, floating among the colors and forms.

There is more than a whiff of the perverse in all this, of course, and it runs throughout the exhibition. Historically, wallpaper was a relatively inexpensive, multiple alternative to one-of-a-kind mural painting or woven tapestries; almost from its inception, it had the additional advantage of being easily tailored to the size of the room because repeat designs could be matched, edge to edge, sheet to sheet. Here, though, Owens has laboriously created a non-repeating, unique object, but using technology designed to easily create unlimited images.

There are yet additional elements of the show, which I find less convincing. If you carefully examine some realistic, old-looking advertising that has been illusionistically "stuck" on the walls, you'll be prompted to text questions to a phone number. Sounds emanate in response from speakers buried in the walls — snippets of music, nonsensical or poetic phrases — most of which add little to the experience. In the back gallery, individual objects that are more like the artist's usual work, and much closer to traditional paintings, are hung alongside her grandmother's needlepoint exercises, coyly implying that there is no difference between so-called high art and the cliched.

The exhibition is called "Ten Paintings," but there is no way to deduce the significance of that title from anything provided to the viewer. Where are those works? Why, they're mounted on 7-by-9-foot aluminum sheets embedded in the walls: The panels were papered over along with the rest of the gallery. When the site-specific show is over, the panels will be cut from the walls and become individual "paintings" to live on, offered for sale and exhibition elsewhere.

And here is where I take issue with the Wattis and its ultra-cool attitude, the kind of posturing that perfectly embodies just what turns many people off from enjoying contemporary art, or even indulging a nascent curiosity. The fact that those 10 paintings lie hidden in the walls is not revealed in the wall text or in the (otherwise well-written) free 16-page exhibition brochure. I know about them because, despite my stated preference to a public relations person and to the director that I wished to see the show on my own, I was given that information, along with other germane details, by Huberman. I came to the gallery unannounced, but within minutes my cover was blown and I had the director by my side, "explaining" it all to me as I stood there protesting in vain.

Why is this a problem? Well, apart from frustrating both my opportunity for an unmediated first experience of the work and my consumer-advocate responsibility to see the exhibition as all visitors see it, it assumed something I find troubling: that, as one of the anointed (I also observed

wealthy donors getting the same treatment a few days later), I somehow "deserved" access to information denied to the rest of the audience. By conscious policy, the public exhibition arm of an educational institution — the well-respected California College of the Arts — picks and chooses who gets to know such details. Indeed, rather than embrace the uninitiated, by providing the tools that would allow people to make their own discoveries, the institute creates hurdles: it imposes its interpretation when it chooses, ungenerously holds back information at a different whim.

That disdain for new audiences is hardly limited to this one instance, and surely not confined to the Wattis Institute. It runs far too deep in what we call the contemporary art world — a phrase itself bloated with arrogance, even as its meaning is perfectly understood.

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Laura Owens: Ten Paintings: Noon-7 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays. Through July 23. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St., S.F. (415) 355-9670. www.wattis.org.

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Above: **Charline von Heyl, *Blotto*, 2004,** oil on linen, 78 x 82".

Statements of Intent

MARK GODFREY ON THE ART OF JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES, LAURA OWENS, AMY SILLMAN, AND CHARLINE VON HEYL

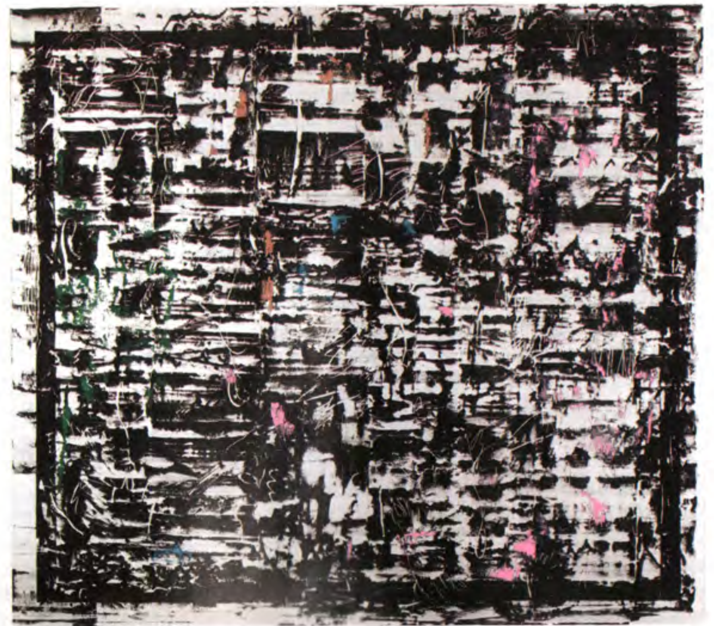
Right: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2014,** Pantone ink, silk-screen ink, Flashe paint, acrylic paint, oil, pastel, paper, and wood on linen, 11' 6" x 8' 8".

Godfrey, Mark. "Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl." *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

LIKE A SOCIALIST INVESTMENT BANKER, a painter in a top MFA program circa 1990 was something of a living contradiction in terms. It's no coincidence, argues curator MARK GODFREY, that artists JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES, LAURA OWENS, AMY SILLMAN, and CHARLINE VON HEYL all got their starts as renegade practitioners of gestural abstraction in the poststudio atmosphere that prevailed a quarter century ago. Challenging their own educations as well as the gendered connotations of their chosen field, Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl established resistant positions poised between authenticity and appropriation. Here, Godfrey looks at the commonalities that unite his subjects, proposing that an adroit "fakery" of gesture and a new engagement with composition, agency, intention, and other erstwhile taboos inform the practices of all four painters—and have made them central to the art of today.

Above: **Amy Sillman, S, 2007,** oil on canvas, 45 x 39".

Right: **Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2014,** oil on linen, 9' 6" x 10' 7".



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BAD EDUCATION

IN 1986, when she was a student in the famously theory-driven Whitney Independent Study Program, the artist Jacqueline Humphries presented a group of her abstract paintings to visiting professor Yvonne Rainer and received a silent shrug in response. The gesture, Humphries recalls, appeared to mean something like "Oh well—there's nothing I can do for someone like you." Humphries was taken aback to find Rainer at a loss for words, but from our vantage point the anecdote isn't so surprising: There were no words, at that time, with which an ISP faculty member might credibly discuss abstract painting. Or rather, there were plenty of words, but all their permutations seemed exhausted. Influential critics had recently dismantled the "return to painting" and had decried the late-1970s retrenchment of unreconstructed expressionism, while artists such as Sherrie Levine, who confronted modernist abstraction as a set of worn-out conventions, had found favor. [2] Between these poles—abdication of criticality on the one hand and proclamations of the medium's depletion on the other—there seemed to be no middle ground. So what *could* Rainer say when confronted by a student who was not treating abstraction with cool detachment, yet was intent on making work that was critically informed?

Fast-forward some twenty-eight years. Today, Humphries has taken her place as one of the most interesting figures in an increasingly celebrated generation of painters that also notably includes Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl. But the words to describe these artists' endeavors still seem to be missing. All four have had key shows in the past year, and seem to garner more institutional support by the month (all are in this year's Whitney Biennial). At a moment that gives every indication of marking a turning point in these artists' receptions, it seems appropriate, if not crucial, to determine what commonalities—not only with respect to concrete matters of paint handling and composition but also in relation to history, to gender, to technology—have placed these artists at the forefront of contemporary painting, and to attend to their own words, their extensive interviews and statements, when doing so.

Any such account must begin by emphasizing the fact that the artists *all* faced Rainer's shrug, so to speak—that is, they came of age in an environment in which their interests in abstract painting were discouraged. The resistance they faced turned out to be productive, something worth considering when we think of younger painters emerging from the anything-goes art school context today. "At the time of my early encounters with the medium," Humphries recalls, "to paint at all denoted artistic failure. So painting's status as the disavowed underside of artmaking gave it fresh meaning—it was almost a kind of rogue practice."[3] Sillman, who studied painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York not long before Humphries's ISP stint, has also spoken about this context, highlighting the extent to which it was inflected by gender expectations: "AbEx painting was not the expectation for a female art student in the 1970s. . . . There is a certain 'transgressive' goal in trying to exploit a collapsed and forbidden terrain in order to open it up, de-mythologize, exploit and change it for new people's use. At that time it was basically like trespassing."[4] Von Heyl now works in New York and Marfa, Texas, but she spent her formative years in the Rhineland, and, as she recalls, "abstraction was absolutely nonexistent in my immediate surroundings in Germany in the '80s. The positions that I was confronted with were Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Martin Kippenberger, and Albert Oehlen's. It was a heavily male, very jokey, and ironic stance toward painting. Anarchistic and also quite arrogant."[5]

Owens started out slightly later, studying at CalArts in the mid-'90s, but the atmosphere was hardly more wel-

These artists, in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of midcentury painting *and* the emptied postmodern gesture. Instead, their canvases are populated by the uncertain, fake, or unlocatable.

Below: Amy Sillman, ***Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting***, 2012, digital animation, 5 minutes 9 seconds.

Opposite page: **Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2011**, oil on linen, 90 x 96".

Godfrey, Mark. "Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl." *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

coming. Students had to wade through the critical literature about painting before setting off on their paths, as if their instructors hoped to dissuade them from actually picking up a brush.[6] Yet thanks in part to David Reed, who was a visiting professor during Owens's student years, Owens did have access to a history of '70s painting that included Mary Heilmann and Joan Snyder. In the early '90s, there was nothing for Owens to read about the links between this work and feminism (later, Helen Molesworth's essay "Painting with Ambivalence," in the catalogue for the 2007 exhibition "WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution," would elucidate these connections[7]), but at least she could glean a sense of a possible relationship between feminism and abstraction. Save for Sherrie Levine's comments about her strategy of showing "the uneasy death of modernism,"[8] largely associated with a canon of male protagonists, no such resource was available to the other three.

APPLYING PAINT

EMERGING WITHIN THESE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, each of these painters would be highly conscious of the heroic and gendered associations of the AbEx and Informel brushstroke, though they also recognized that generations of artists before them, from Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein to Polke, had deflated these gestures. They would also have taken note of postmodern parodies and appropriations of certain kinds of brushstrokes. But they understood that to base a practice on mapping abstraction's failures or exposing styles of paint application as empty conventions was no longer valid. Sillman has noted in these pages that such critiques are themselves a lazy cliché: "[AbEx's] detractors would have it that the whole kit and caboodle is nothing but bad politics steel-welded around a chassis of machismo—that the paint stroke, the very use of the arm, is equivalent to a phallic spurt."[9]

Intent on transferring the liquid matter of paint to canvas, the four artists developed a variety of responses to these fraught circumstances. Sillman's strategy has been to deploy this gestural mode, but in such a way as to indicate a kind of hesitancy about its use. Each of her strokes reveals itself not as the final masterful decision but as just one more application on a surface already covered with other strokes, which you can see behind to the last one. In addition to layering strata of pigment in paintings such as *S*, 2007, she complicates the distinctions between brushed areas of color and the drawn lines that outline forms or describe vectors, creating a sense of uncertainty as to the identity of each.

Humphries also confronts AbEx tropes, recognizing that quotation and parody are not the only ways of playing with preconceptions. In an untitled painting from 2011, a slathering of pink pigment, dripping toward the work's bottom edge, evokes such tropes, but Humphries's

Godfrey, Mark. "Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl." *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

Above: **Charline von Heyl, *It's Vot's Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, 2010,** acrylic and oil on linen and canvas, 82 x 72".

Below: **Charline von Heyl, *Dusty Dafni*, 2011,** acrylic on linen, 82 x 72".

treatment of this quintessential AbEx mark goes far beyond allusion. "A drip, formerly a symbol of feckless artistic abandon, becomes for me a primary structuring agent," she says. "To enact a gestural mark, I must locate myself in the gap between its form and its received meaning."[10] In *41/14*, 2014, in the Whitney Biennial, drips that we assume were the product of unintentional runoff are in fact highly constructed, resulting from the buildup of dry paint rather than the movement of liquid paint: fake drips.

In von Heyl's work, too, what appears to be a drip or a quickly made stroke is, as often as not, something else altogether. For instance, in *It's Vot's Behind Me That I Am (Krazy Kat)*, 2010, a line of drips changes color, indicating that half of them are "painted" drips rather than trails of paint. And von Heyl hunts down modes of paint handling that are even more problematic than the AbEx stroke, often looking back to artists whom she calls "second rate" and who have fallen utterly out of favor. She might emulate the thin lines in Bernard Buffet's portraits (her *Bois-Tu de la Bier?*, 2012) or the thick black lines in Celestino Piatti's illustrations (her *Big Zipper*, 2011) or the "heavy-duty, existential oil painting"[11] of Georges Rouault (*Igitur*, 2008). Sometimes she will appear to have faithfully replicated such marks, but "when you get close, you realize that the surface is not keeping that promise; it's almost like a betrayal."[12] She remarks, "I never saw myself as appropriating styles. I'm using different effects and procedures, and different materials."[13] Nor does she wish to critique the idea of the unitary author by avoiding the development of a signature style. The idea, for her, is to ask in what ways these absolutely "forbidden" methods might be useful now, stripped of the rhetoric that once surrounded them. Von Heyl also seeks to make marks that look as if they've been mechanically printed—she may fake the appearance of the ink smudge (*Dusty Dafni*, 2011), say, or the engraved line. These notions of paint application as faking, even betrayal, are important, as is the distinction from quotation or parody: We feel confused by an act of faking, but sure of ourselves with an act of quotation. Von Heyl, moreover, has proposed a position of falseness as the beginning of a new kind of sincerity. "At the core of my being in the world, and my being an artist, is this feeling of falseness, which feels paradoxically like the one truly existential sense of self left, or possible. And it is this paradoxical twist that gives me a new lease on pathos."[14]

Owens's approach to applying paint is perhaps best illustrated by her experiments with impasto in "Pavement Karaoke," 2012, a series of seven paintings, and in the twelve works made in 2013 for her space, 356 S. Mission Rd., in LA. In these works, impasto, that erstwhile calling card of impassioned expressionism, does not carry the meanings it did in the '50s. The thick strokes of whipped-up Day-Glo paint are confined within crisply outlined, bulbous shapes that, one quickly concludes, must be digitally generated. In fact, the forms are created by a painting program that allows the user to select a curved line from a menu and elaborate it into perfect squiggles and equally perfect erasures; Owens projects such figures onto canvas and fills them in with impasto. The impression of fakeness is amplified by the illusionistic drop shadows she paints in to accompany the real shadows cast by the physical crests. Discussing these works in these pages, Owens has said that she wanted "to emphatically try to inhabit the gesture."[15] But she went on to ask, "Is it even possible for a woman artist to be the one who marks?" She sees her recent paintings not only as subjecting gesture to forms of mediation but also as posing a radical question: If painterly gestures have long been understood in relation to the male orgasm, and if "the female orgasm has no use [in terms of reproduction], no mark, no locatability," is it possible to conceive of the female orgasm as a "model for a new gesture"—one that is both hard to locate spatially and not identifiable as assignable to a particular author?

All four of these painters, then, in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of midcentury *and* the emptied postmodern gesture. Instead, their canvases are populated by uncertain, fake,

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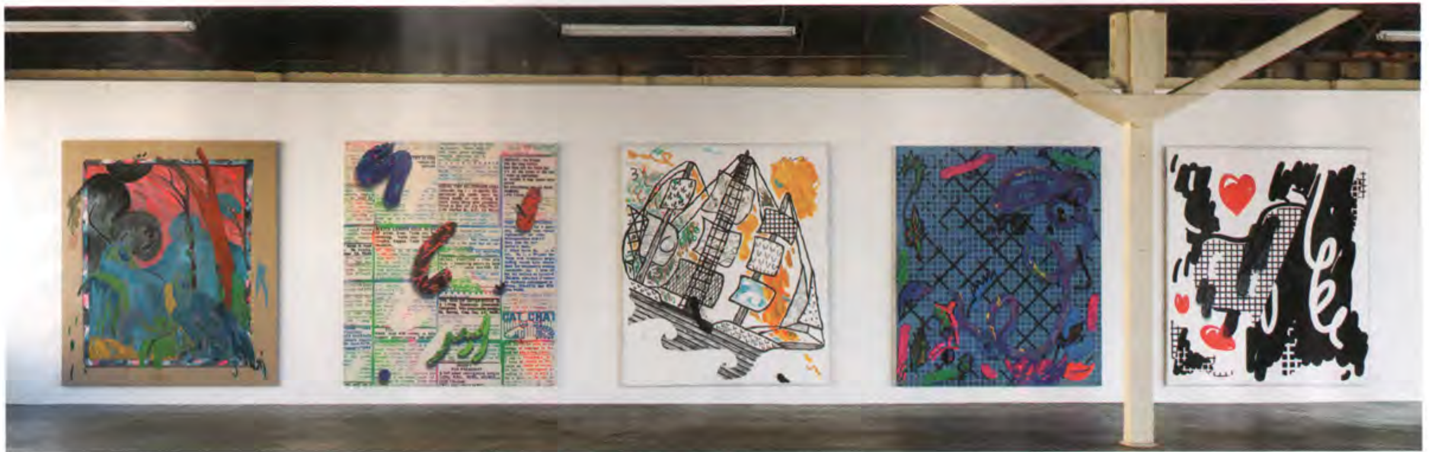

View of "12 Paintings by Laura Owens," 2013, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. All: *Untitled*, 2013. Photo: Joshua White.

or unlocatable gestures. And where we do find "real" drips or passages of firm brushwork, we find it impossible to read them as we once did. Meaning is thrown back onto the viewer as the artists' own subjective investments in their decisions around paint handling become indeterminate and unknowable.

COMPOSITION

THE VERY IDEA OF COMPOSITION is as beleaguered as the brushstroke. In a recent statement summarizing his career-long theorization of this subject, Yve-Alain Bois contrasted the fundamentally arbitrary gesture of the traditional composing author—"the expressionist route taken by Kandinsky"[16]—with Mondrian's rigorous approach to composition, where "a painting is understood as a highly balanced assembly of diverse elements unified through the action of an extremely complex system of thought."[17] It is, however, noncomposition, as Bois has shown, that is the defining rubric of modernism. Noncompositional responses to expressionist composition have played out in each generation over the twentieth century, generating modernism's signal strategies: the grid, the monochrome, the allover, the indexical transfer, the deductive structure, and various chance procedures such as the abdication to nature or gravity in process art.

The four painters under discussion here share a nuanced skepticism of the "expressionist route," and they do not work in strict sequence, with one composition generating a formal problem to be tackled in the next, in the manner of Mondrian. Most important, and against the tide of recent critically sanctioned abstraction, they complicate and even eschew noncomposition, developing ways of composing that are organic, unpredictable, and contingent. Such terms would seem the very definition of one strain of noncomposition—the organic, unpredictable, and contingent province of chance—but these painters show that one can productively mine both the subjective gesture and the contingent event, and need not make a false choice between the two. To them, many artists engaging noncomposition today can appear problematically proud, as if congratulating themselves on how each decision about color, canvas shape, amount of pigment, and so on is subject either to some preconceived system or to some aleatoric operation. The four probably recognize that noncompositional strategies have always involved initial personal, though underacknowledged, decisions on the part of artists; but there are more serious reasons for their departure from noncomposition. They realize that it has historically been (and to an extent

Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl all describe the procedure of beginning a work as a confrontation—they speak of being in front of a blank canvas, of facing the vertiginous uncertainty of just starting off.

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Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2012, acrylic, Flashe paint, oil, resin, collage, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 x 1⅝".

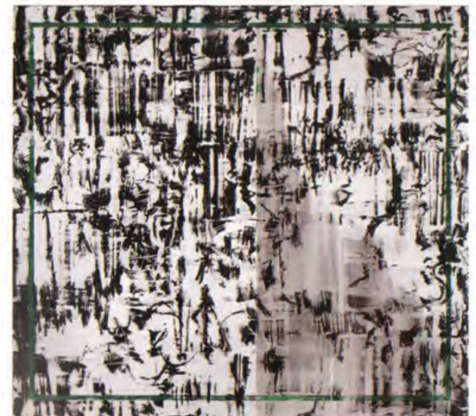
still is) the privilege of white male artists to do away with their subjectivity (even if, of course, many artists have specifically used noncomposition to combat the hegemony of the bourgeois, Western notion of the individual subject). When one does not fit that default position, there is rather more at stake in deciding whether or not to foreground the self in all its ineluctably political specificity.

There is another factor militating against noncomposition for these painters: They are working at a moment when technological changes are dramatically reconfiguring and arguably devastating the subject, when the "personal" is largely a function of how we self-advertise on social media, and when scanned fingerprints are about to replace PINS (our memories bypassed, our bodies finally become machines for buying). Adopting chance or systematic procedures associated with noncomposition could today be seen as replicating the manner in which complex algorithms present and predict information, a submission to the rule of technology. For Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl, then, subjective compositional procedures have a contemporary urgency but are reinstated in new ways. The painter, though constantly making considered decisions during composition, is never quite transparent to herself and never, therefore, quite transparent to her viewer.

All four describe the procedure of beginning a work as a confrontation—they speak of being in front of a blank canvas, of facing the vertiginous uncertainty of just starting off. Once they begin, the process is one of constant accumulation and "violation,"[18] "compulsive undoing,"[19] "sabotage,"[20] transgression, and so on. They are all well aware that the notion of the painting as a "living thing" has previously been dismissed as an absurd, romantic cliché, but nevertheless say that they get to a point where the painting begins to appear to them as an entity that makes calls on them, that might irritate them, surprise them, confuse them. Von Heyl is clearest: "I don't want to make the painting, I want the painting to invent itself and surprise me."[21]

There is a term or idea that recurs in their accounts, and that is *unknowability*. Humphries says, "I have to destroy the painting I know to make the one I don't know yet."[22] Sillman has said, "Making paintings for me is liminal: not quite-known, coming-into-being, not-yet-seen, being-remembered."[23] Von Heyl phrases it thus: "I can get beyond [design] only in the

Charline von Heyl, *P.*, 2008, acrylic and crayon on linen, 82 x 74".



Jacqueline Humphries, *41/14*, 2014, oil on linen, 9' 6" x 10' 7".

Godfrey, Mark. "Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl." *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

The painter, though constantly making considered decisions during composition, is never quite transparent to herself and never, therefore, quite transparent to her viewer.

Charline von Heyl, *Oread*, 2011, acrylic, oil, and oil stick on linen, 82 x 74".

unknown. . . . I can force myself into that concentrated mindspace that is just looking and goes beyond thinking."[24] Owens makes a similar point when she speaks of her refusal to "language"[25] her work—the word *language*, repurposed as a verb, referencing an exhaustive thinking-through of each decision, so that refusal to "language" is a kind of refusal to know, or to know too much.

Such invocations of unknowability could be caricatured as so many New Age bromides, but we would be wrong to characterize them in this way. For a start, the unknowable has a new premium in a culture that prides itself on being able to know everything via instant access (constitutional or not) to massive troves of information. The language of the unknowable also resonates with Eva Hesse's claim that she wanted to get to "what is yet not known."[26] This lineage raises the question of whether we can locate a feminist position in this approach to abstraction. Molesworth, for one, has already pushed for the term *unknowability* in a 2013 essay on Sillman: "For me, feminism is a critique of power and mastery, and most of all it's a warning about how the combination of mastery and power has, historically, led to violence. One result of this questioning of power is that unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue."[27] What seems astonishing, and what may be the generative paradox at the heart of these practices, is the fact that each painter harnesses unknowability as an essential part of making art, but at the same time brings to her practice a profound knowledge of how to make, and fake, marks on canvas, how to navigate the histories and associations of those marks and control what impact they might have on viewers.

To get a finer-grained sense of this dialectic of the known and unknown, a closer look at each artist's process is in order. Owens's process (at least in recent paintings) is slightly distinct, given that her work is begun on a computer, and that her methods involve silk-screening and require assistance and planning. Nevertheless, there are fundamental similarities between her approach and those of Humphries, Sillman, and von Heyl. For "Pavement Karaoke," her first decision was to spell the unlikely titular phrase across the canvases in areas of silk screen made from vintage newspaper classified ads. She added sections of gingham, painted grids, and tilted lattices; the computer-drawn, impasto-filled brushstrokes discussed above; painted-in shadows; and scatters of applied lava rocks. Strikingly, these components have no evident conceptual connection either to one another or to the idea of singing Pavement songs in a karaoke bar. This collision of elements might be viewed as hermetic and incoherent, but should be understood as a direct refusal of the pedagogy of CalArts, where artists were trained to explain and justify each step of each project. Owens willfully blasts her paintings with heterogeneous materials, processes,

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references, and textures, with no reverence toward the medium, confident that such amalgams will coalesce as dynamic works that could not have been planned in advance. "I really want paintings to be problems. . . . The painting is coming out at you and asking you to put these things together. . . . What interests me in painting is that it comes out into the room, almost punches you in the face."[28]

Von Heyl's ambition is "to create an image that has the iconic value of a sign but remains ambiguous in its meaning."[29] She has stated, "I want to get abstraction to a point where it screams that it is something: a representation and a thing."[30] To do this, the painting has to go beyond what she calls "design,"[31] a term that for her refers to the visually known world—not only designed objects but also products, websites, ads, etc. Design gives things recognizability, and the meaning of designed things relies on this recognition. It is what a painter will fall into when she knows what she is doing—so von Heyl says she inevitably finds herself designing, but that she strives to go beyond this. For her, abstraction, when successful, has the same reality and visual power as design, but will be more difficult than design and will not convey a meaning. She will borrow memorable and identifiable elements from visual culture—checkerboards (*Yellow Guitar*, 2010), harlequin patterns (*Blotto*, 2004), figurative shapes (*Skull*, 2012), frames (*Dumka*, 2007), sawtooth serrated edges and zigzag lines (*P.*, 2008)—but her aim is to exceed the easy interpretations they promise. Similarly, she uses the bold colors associated with product design in ways that make them unfamiliar: In *Oread*, 2011, for instance, a thin layer of fluorescent yellow is detached from a brash composition of bulbous black forms and circles beneath.

Humphries, for her part, aims to produce works that powerfully communicate a sense of being unfinished: "I start a painting by finishing it, then may proceed to unfinish it, make holes in it or undo it in various ways, as a kind of escape from that finitude."[32] Across another painting at the Whitney, *Untitled*, 2014, for instance, there are several small silver loops, and it's hard to tell if they're the result of scratches or strokes. Appearing as impromptu doodles, they feel like initial, rather than final, gestures, productively out of kilter with the scale of the painting. Humphries has for some time begun her compositions by painting frames, and these serve as structures against which to work: "The frame is a way of saying, 'this, here, now' then I break into that."[33] The frames also lead us to anticipate an allover arrangement of marks within them, but often Humphries fractures the internal space, leaving prominent diagonal or vertical breaks which (as in *41/14*) can feel productively awkward. She seeks a final (if not necessarily finished) state in which figure-ground relationships have disintegrated. The idea of a place from which to feel a sense of authority as a viewer disintegrates, too, because it is impossible to orient oneself to any particular point or shape.[34] Whereas von Heyl, having taken a composition past the recognizability of design, stops when the painting asserts itself as a powerful image that has not existed before, Humphries ends in a place where the painting will not cohere and creates the experience of the unknown at every instance of looking at it.

These artists are not particularly preoccupied with the effects of technoculture on the life of images. Instead, their concern is with the effect of technological shifts on *our lives*.

Left: **Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2013**, oil on linen, 100 x 111".

Right: **Charline von Heyl, *Jakealoo*, 2012**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 82 x 74".

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Amy Sillman, *Clubfoot*, 2011, oil on canvas, 91 x 83 ⅞".

Above: Amy Sillman, *Duel*, 2011, oil on canvas, 90 ½ x 84 ¼".

Below: Amy Sillman, *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, 2012, digital animation, 5 minutes 9 seconds.

VIEWING BODIES

THIS BRINGS US TO THE QUESTION of what happens when we, as embodied subjects, view these paintings. It seems clear that these artists recognize the changing conditions of perception and subjectivity in the world of digital spectacle, and hold out against this regime's vitiation of corporeal experience. Humphries, Owens, Sillman, and von Heyl are not particularly preoccupied with the effects of techno-culture on the life of images, as, for example, Wade Guyton is, with his attention to the change in appearance and materiality of an image between computer screen, printout, and catalogue page. Their concern is with the effect of technological shifts on *our lives*. They recognize the way these shifts alter our sense of space and scale, our capacity for attention, our anxiety level as our iPhones keep us constantly at work. Acknowledging all this, they challenge us to look carefully and slowly, insisting on the works' physical presence and on the real differences among layers on the surface of canvas, and restoring to us a sense of our human scale as we encounter the paintings within real, not virtual, space.

Some years ago, thinking about the illumination of faces by the glow of computer screens, Humphries began to work with silver paint that she mixed herself, alongside deep, nonreflective, powdery black. Rather than emitting an even glow, as screens do, her surfaces absorb light and reflect it unevenly, while the borders between areas of absorption and reflection are scratchy and ill defined. The viewer is kept mobile by this optical instability and, as when Humphries is collapsing figure-ground distinctions, is unable to settle on a fixed position. The experience in front of Humphries's work can be like a dance,

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but the dancer is beset by uncertainty about where to be.[35] And this experience is complicated by the "false drips" and by the way Humphries works with layering and color. Flashes of color in paintings, such as *Untitled* at the Whitney, that are mainly covered in silver and black initially appear to constitute the works' top layer, but as we get closer we discern that the colored pigment is a prior layer.

Humphries is clear that her primary motivation is not to create uncertainty as a value in itself but to captivate a viewer just as screens do. Aware of screens' allure, she aims to offer an equally seductive but more complex experience: "I think a painter's first job is to get someone to look at a painting." She cites "a kind of theatricality which may even veer toward the melodramatic."[36] Such terms might also be used to characterize the experience of viewing von Heyl's work, which also teasingly defies presumptions about layering. One assumes instinctively that the yellow and white stripes in Orpheus,2008, lie behind the brown forms, but close up to the painting, you discover the stripes are in fact above, painted around. In *Jakealoo*, 2012, it seems clear that orange and red stripes have been laid down below a white expanse in the top right corner. Von Heyl painted two little black-framed windows in the white field as if to let us see through to this earlier layer, but when you get near, you see within the frame a third layer of yellow and red lying above the white. Unlike, say, the aleatory rips in Gerhard Richter's squeegee paintings, which offer glimpses of earlier layers of paint, von Heyl's sleight of hand is premeditated: "My paintings have weird shifts where you don't expect them. . . . It's not about mystifying anything; it's about lengthening the time of pleasure. Or torture."[37] She has also spoken of a "visual mindfuck."[38] It strikes me that what von Heyl does with layering acknowledges the supersmooth layering in computer screens but complicates it, insisting on the physical rather than the virtual, rewarding a different mode of attention that, as her language suggests, can be just as libidinal as digital visuality.

With their powerful frontality, the layers of Owens's paintings—grids, letters, strokes, all stacked parallel to the picture plane—might also remind us of the windows on computer screens. But her digital processes and references to the visual world of the screen serve only as tools in a larger project that insists on the importance of material surfaces seen in real space. Viewing her works means contrasting peaks of impasto and fake drop shadows; it means understanding that the real gaps between the paintings of "Pavement Karaoke"are part of the composition; it means spotting the frayed gingham beside slickly painted-on grids; and it means making decisions about whether to stand close enough to read the silk-screened texts or far enough away to see the whole work. It also means being assaulted by color so intense as to seem viscerally present.

In von Heyl's studio, it struck me that all the paintings, despite differences in composition, facture, and color, were about the same size. Her immediate explanation: The works were scaled to her reach. In making her largest paintings small enough to be worked on without ladders, von Heyl is close to Sillman and Humphries. The paintings' essentially anthropomorphic scale, a few feet high and an arm-stretch wide, reminds us of our own bodies as we view.[39] Owens's "Pavement Karaoke"canvases and the paintings that appeared in her 2013 exhibition at the Los Angeles venue 356 S. Mission Rd. are considerably larger. However, even these works do not lend themselves to white-cube hyperbole. At 356 S. Mission Rd. it was clear that the space, with its raw architecture, was a gathering spot as much as a site of display, and in addition to providing a necessary openness in contrast to the enclosure of screen culture, this sociable atmosphere made the paintings feel generous in scale rather than bombastic.

Humphries's and Owens's insistence on physical experience is echoed by Sillman's and von Heyl's insistence on the bodily within their imagery. Many of Sillman's most abstract paintings are derived from sketches of figures. In other works by the artist, the body is unmistakable even if only recognized in fragments—dislocated shoulders, drooping limbs, and so on, as seen for example in *Clubfoot*, 2011. In von Heyl's work, the body registers, but never in its totality as a coherent depiction. Marks in one painting might recall smears of blood or excrement; a handprint appears in another. Knowing that the history of Western painting has centered on the representation of skin, and that its depiction can act as a lure for a viewer, she detaches skin from the body and subjects it to strange travails—for instance in *Frenhoferin*, 2009, in which it looks as if skin is being pushed through a sieve.

Sillman is the only one of the four to actually make works for the screen. In a recent exhibition at Thomas Dane, London, pride of place was given to a heavily worked painting called *Duel*, 2011, dominated by a slit flanked by two drooping hands. Next to this she hung an iPad showing *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, 2012, an animation suggesting various directions the composition of *Duel* might go, were she to continue working on the painting. The animation gives clues to Sillman's own compositional processes: The slit becomes a curtain, then a wound, and later simply a line. Lines become limbs and hands become blobs; blocks of color squeeze to penis shapes and balls become breasts. Things excrete as they transform. It makes no sense to see abstraction and figuration as poles—like the male and female body parts, they are in a constant state of becoming each other. Memorable scenes convey attempts to probe sources: A man digs up the ground, a bunny blabs on an analyst's chair, a searchlight shines in the dark, but against the promise that stable origins could be discovered, there is a constant sense of morphing. Where Owens hints at the computer-drawn origins of her "brushstrokes" by making them so perfectly bulbous, Sillman manages to make the slick surface of an iPad appear like a canvas layered with translucent pigments. It's not just that we see things that touch and are touched: The glass of the iPad itself seems "scumbled," or "scratchy," or "buttery."[40] The way the compositions change in the animation implies no straightforward intentionality but suggests the artist submitting herself to the contingencies of humor, desire, and the pleasures of change. Yet at the same time, Sillman is surely reflecting on the conditions of her own practice. She has spoken about the way the juxtapositions of iPad and canvas undercut the idea of the painting as a finished entity. But the juxtaposition also destabilizes the authority of the screen and, with it, the credibility of the promises that screens seem to offer: to make life more efficient, to allow us to communicate better,and so on. Sillman's animations offer no such platitudes: Like the surface of the painting, already thickened with past ideas, the iPad animation keeps on going, refusing conclusions.

MARK GODFREY IS A CURATOR AT TATE MODERN IN LONDON.

Godfrey, Mark. "Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl." *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

NOTES

1. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” and Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981): 39–68 and 69–86.

2. In his essay “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Hal Foster wrote that Levine’s “abstract paintings simulate modes of abstraction, as if to demonstrate that they are no longer critically reflexive or historically necessary forms with direct access to unconscious truths or a transcendental realm beyond the world—they are simply styles among others.” *Art in America*, June 1986, 80–91, 139.

3. Jacqueline Humphries, “Statement,” *Artforum*, Summer 2011, 351.

4. “Parts & Labour: Amy Sillman in Conversation with Matt Saunders,” *Frieze*, September 2010, frieze.com/issue/article/parts-labour.

5. Shirley Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl,” *Bomb*, Fall 2010, bombmagazine.org/article/3655/charline-von-heyl.

6. Owens’s CalArts classmate Monique Prieto comments: “Rather than just bypassing the critical texts or letting them stop me dead in my tracks, I tried to take them in and glean any elements that might allow a poor fool like myself to carry on.” “Thick and Thin: A Roundtable,” *Artforum*, April 2003, 177.

7. Helen Molesworth, “Painting with Ambivalence,” in *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 428–39.

8. Sherrie Levine, quoted in Elisabeth Sussman, “The Last Picture Show,” in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, exh. cat.(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 61.

9. Amy Sillman, “AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II,” *Artforum*, Summer 2011, 321.

10. Humphries, “Statement,” 351.

11. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. “Kaja Silverman and Charline von Heyl,” in *Charline von Heyl*, ed. Jenelle Porter, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2011), unpaginated.

15. “Optical Drive: Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer Talks to Laura Owens,” *Artforum*, March 2013, 236.

16. Yve-Alain Bois, “Abstraction 1910–1925: Eight Statements,” *October*, no. 143 (Winter 2013): 8.

17. Ibid., 8.

18. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

19. Thomas Eggerer, “Meditations of the Split Self,” in *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*, ed. Helen Molesworth, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2013), 148.

20. John Kelsey, “Charline von Heyl Talks About Sabotage,” *Artforum*, October 2008, 331.

21. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

22. Cecily Brown, “Jacqueline Humphries,” *Bomb*, Spring 2009, bombmagazine.org/article/3262/jacqueline-humphries.

23. Amy Sillman, “Process,” in Painting: *The Implicit Horizon*, ed. Avigail Moss and Kerstin Stakemeier (Maastricht, the Netherlands: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012), 102.

24. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

25. Laura Owens in conversation with the author, January 2014.

26. Eva Hesse, “Statement” for “Art in Process IV,” 1969, Finch College Museum of Art, New York.

27. Helen Molesworth, “Amy Sillman: Look, Touch, Embrace,” in Molesworth, *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*, 52.

28. Stephen Berens and Jan Tumlir, “Still Lifing: Conversation with Laura Owens,” *X-Tra*, December 2013, 92.

29. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

30. Kelsey, “Charline von Heyl,” 331.

31. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

32. Paul Soto, “Painting in Silver and Noir: Q+A with Jacqueline Humphries,” *Art in America*, April 30, 2012, artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/jacqueline-humphries-greene-naftali/.

33. Ibid.

34. Humphries has referred to this space as comparable to the space of film noir: “In film noir, the figure is completely collapsed into the picture. His face is often in shadow when he is speaking, and he is completely embedded in the atmosphere and light of the frame. [Paul] Schrader [in ‘Notes on Film Noir’] says something else that is interesting, he says, ‘No figure can speak authoritatively from within a space that is continually being cut into ribbons of light.’ I feel this statement captures something that I am after in the paintings, of complete embeddedness, with a sense of the painting itself as figure, conterminously layered on top of and under the ground.” Ibid.

35. Reviewing Humphries’s 2006 exhibition, Johanna Burton wrote, “The viewer is strongly tempted to dance in front of paintings that seem to change according to one’s viewpoint.” *Artforum*, February 2007, 292.

36. Brown, “Jacqueline Humphries.”

37. Kaneda, “Charline von Heyl.”

38. Ibid.

39. This kind of bodily scale can be achieved without making work relating to our height and arm span. Tomma Abts’s works are scaled to the human face and are perceived in this intimate way; of Ulrike Müller’s paintings, Sillman herself writes, “Ulrike’s paintings maintain a scale of provocatively intimate one-to-one body operations, or body-to-object operations, reminding the viewer of objects of desire that she touches daily.” Amy Sillman, “This Place Which Is Not One,” in *Ulrike Müller: Franza, Fever 103*, and Quilts, ed. Achim Hochdörfer and Barbara Schröder, exh. cat. (New York: Dancing Foxes Press, 2012), 68.

40. Matt Saunders uses these adjectives to describe Sillman’s surfaces. Matt Saunders, “Amy Sillman,” *Artforum*, March 2014, 282.

Caption acknowledgments

Pages 69–70: All works © Estate of Nancy Holt/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. **Pages 97–98:** All works by Marcel Broodthaers © Estate Marcel Broodthaers/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SABAM, Brussels. **Page 111:** Christof Kohlhöfer and Sigmar Polke’s *Der ganze Körper fühlt sich leicht und möchte fliege . . .* (The Whole Body Feels Light and Wants to Fly . . .), 1969. © Christof Kohlhöfer; digital transfer by Dieter Schleicher. **Pages 111–112:** All works by Sigmar Polke © The Estate of Sigmar Polke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. **Page 184:** Carl Andre, Foot Candle, 2002.© Carl Andre/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. **Page 187:** Page from Jasper Johns’s *Foirades/Fizzles*, 1976. © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. **Page 188:** Andy Warhol, *Poster (Halston Advertising Campaign: Men’s Wear)*, 1982. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. **Page 276:** Lygia Clark’s proposition for *Ping-Pong*, 1966. Photo: Associação Cultural “O Mundo de Lygia Clark,” Rio de Janeiro. **Page 314:** Fortunato Depero, *Sketch of Pavilion for the Davide Campari & C.*, 1933. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.

Godfrey, Mark. “Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl.” *Artforum* 52, no. 9, May 2014, pp. 294–302, 344.

KUNSTFORUM
International

GESPRÄCHE MIT KÜNSTLERN

LAURA OWENS

I LIKE THE IDEA OF NOT KNOWING

EIN GESPRÄCH MIT FABIAN STECH

Ich besuchte Laura Owens im Sommer 2012. Sie wohnt hinter dem Dodgersstadium in Los Angeles. Von ihrem Haus auf dem Hügel sieht man in der milchigen Ferne den Schriftzug Hollywood. Das moderne Atelier liegt etwas weiter unten am Hang. Geschäftiges Treiben ihrer Assistenten, die mit ihr eine große Ausstellung in London vorbereiten, veranlasst Laura Owens mich erst einmal mit ihrem Toyota Prius in ihr neues Atelier in Downtown Los Angeles zu fahren, wo Sie in der Mission Road ein großes altes lichtdurchflutetes Fabrikgebäude angemietet hat, in dem sie arbeitet und gleichzeitig ihre Ausstellung für das Frühjahr 2013 vorbereitet. Auf der Fahrt sprechen wir über Mike Davis' Buch „The City of Quartz" und den Einfluss der Gefängnisarchitektur auf die Stadt Los Angeles, einer Stadt in der große Teile des öffentlichen Raums wie Parks und Grünanlagen systematisch von Shopping Malls und manchmal von Gefängnissen verdrängt wurden. Auf einem alten Sofa in der Mitte des Ateliers erklärt Laura Owens mir präzis und konzentriert, warum es für sie wichtig ist, in einem Raum zu arbeiten und auszustellen und wie sie zu den mannigfaltigen Ausdrucksformen zwischen Abstraktion und Illustration kommt, die ihre Werke ausmachen.

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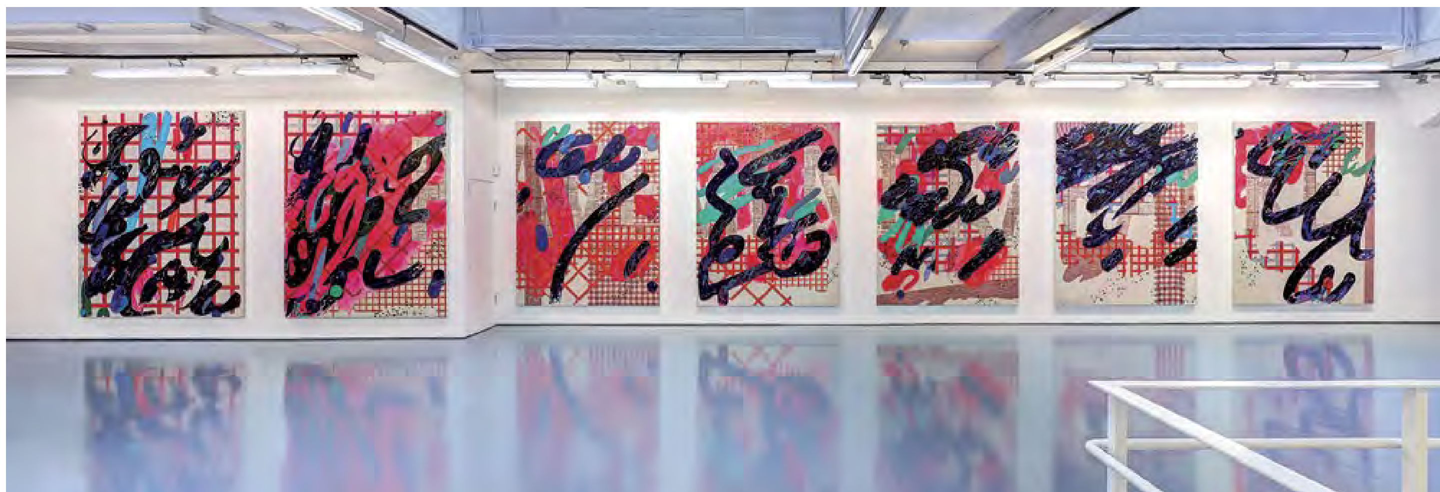


Ausstellungsansicht LAURA OWENS, Pavement Karaoke, 4 Burlington Place, London W1, 09.10.2012 – 17.11.2012. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Sadie Coles HQ, London

Stech, Fabian. "Laura Owens: I Like the Idea of Not Knowing." *Kunstforum International*, May/June 2013, pp. 182–95.

LAURA OWENS, 2012. Foto: Fabian Stech

FABIAN STECH: Kannst du mir dein Projekt in Los Angeles erklären?

LAURA OWENS: Ich hatte schon lange die Absicht eine Ausstellung in Los Angeles zu machen. Ich wollte einen Ort finden, an dem ich beides machen konnte: erst arbeiten und dann ausstellen. Einen Ort zu finden, der mir als Atelier und als Ausstellungsort dienen konnte, bedeutet für mich einen neuen Raumtyp zu schaffen. Das Projekt ist auch von der Geschichte der Künstler inspiriert, die in Los Angeles ortsspezifische Kunst gemacht haben, wie z.B. Mike Kelley oder Jason Rhoades. Schon in der Vergangenheit ist meine Arbeit von den Räumen beeinflusst worden, in denen sie gezeigt wurde. Ich habe ein Jahr lang gesucht und dabei an eine bestimmte Architektur gedacht, die spezifische Konnotationen hat. Ich habe Orte wie eine alte Kirche oder ein verlassenes Filmtheater gesucht. Dann habe ich die Idee aufgegeben und mich entschieden, einen Ort zu finden, an dem ich eine direktere Ausstellung von Malerei machen konnte.

Eigenartig, dass du an dem Ort auch arbeiten wolltest. Denkst du, dass es nicht nur die Hängung deiner Bilder, sondern auch die Arbeit selbst beeinflusst?

Ich hoffe die Tatsache, dass ich hier gearbeitet habe, beeinflusst die Ausstellung. Es ist eine Gefühlssache, ein natürlicherer Weg, um zu arbeiten und die Arbeit zu sehen. Ich will sehen, was in einem Raum passiert, den man ein Jahr benutzt hat. Es geht nicht nur darum, wie die Arbeit vom Raum beeinflusst wird, sondern auch um die Möglichkeit etwas außerhalb des Galeriesystems und der Institutionen und Museen zu entwickeln. Es hängt von mir ab, wie es sein wird und wann es geöffnet ist. Bisher weiß ich noch nicht, wie ich die Ausstellung nennen werde, oder wie es als Ausstellung oder Projekt beschrieben wird[1]. In gewisser Hinsicht vertraue ich auf den Prozess. Dem Prozess zu erlauben seine eigne Kraft zu entwickeln und Beziehungen zu Menschen und Ideen zu haben, ist interessant. Manche Personen, die für mich arbeiten haben bestimmte Kapazitäten. Zum Beispiel Calvin dort ist ein ausgesprochen erfahrener Siebdrucker. Wir haben zusammen gearbeitet und seine Präsenz hat mich zum Siebdruck geführt und mir erlaubt, den Siebdruck in meine Arbeit aufzunehmen. Einflüsse und unvorhergesehene Möglichkeiten zu zulassen gibt den Ton für den Arbeitsprozess vor und das ist nur ein Beispiel. Die Idee etwas nicht zu wissen gefällt mir. Es gibt ein Element das Angst einflößt, aber es ist auch sehr frei und es reizt mich.

Du hast gesagt, dieser Raum sei neutraler als der Ort, den du dir zuerst vorgestellt hast. Hat die ausgesprochene Industriearchitektur des Raums das Format der Bilder oder andere Parameter beeinflusst?

Ich habe keine Ahnung. Die Größe des Raums hat mich vielleicht inspiriert und die Idee, dass es noch einen weit größeren Maßstab gab in dem ich arbeiten konnte, hat mich interessiert. Ich habe viele Ausstellungen gemacht in denen sich die Ideen zwischen den Bildern und der Akkumulation von Bildern gezeigt haben. Hier ist meine Absicht den Betrachter in jedem Gemälde zu erkunden. Ich habe mich in einer Art und Weise daran gehalten, wie ich es vorher noch nie gemacht habe. Zum Beispiel die „Clock Paintings", die du auf der Art Basel[2] gesehen hast. Sie bestehen aus 94 Bildern, aber sie sind ein Werk! 2011 habe ich neun Bilder gemacht und jedes hatte das Format von 213 x 243 cm[3] , aber es handelte sich auch um ein

Werk. Sie sind dafür gedacht jeglichen Raum, in dem sie ausgestellt werden entweder auf einer, zwei, drei oder vier Seiten einzuhüllen.

In den 90iger Jahren habe ich begonnen großformatige Gemälde zu machen und auch über den Raum zwischen den Bildern zu sprechen. In der Ausstellung, die ich 1998 gleichzeitig in drei Städten New York, Chicago und Los Angeles eröffnet habe, ging es ebenfalls darum. Das Gemälde in Chicago war in der University Gallery quer zu einem Fenster von 30 m Länge installiert, das auf den Lake Michigan ging. Die Galerie war ca. 25 m lang und ich habe in situ ein 13 m langes Bild gemalt, in dem ich die Horizontlinie vom Lake Michigan wieder aufnahm.

Du hast gesagt, dass du dich in der neuen Ausstellung nicht darauf konzentrieren wirst, was zwischen den Bildern vorgeht, sondern darauf, was in den Bilder passiert. Betrachtest du die Bilder als ein Fenster oder als Öffnung auf einen anderen Raum?

Nein. Wenn die Kombination der Bilder und der Ausstellungsort Sinn hervorbringen, dann lässt der Druck auf die einzelnen Bildern nach. Die einzelnen Bilder müssen nicht unbedingt auf der Höhe sein. Die Bilder haben also keinen individuellen Gestalteffekt, wie ihn ein begrenztes historisches oder autonomes Objekt hätte. Darüber habe ich eine Weile gearbeitet und ein Beispiel sind die „Clock paintings".

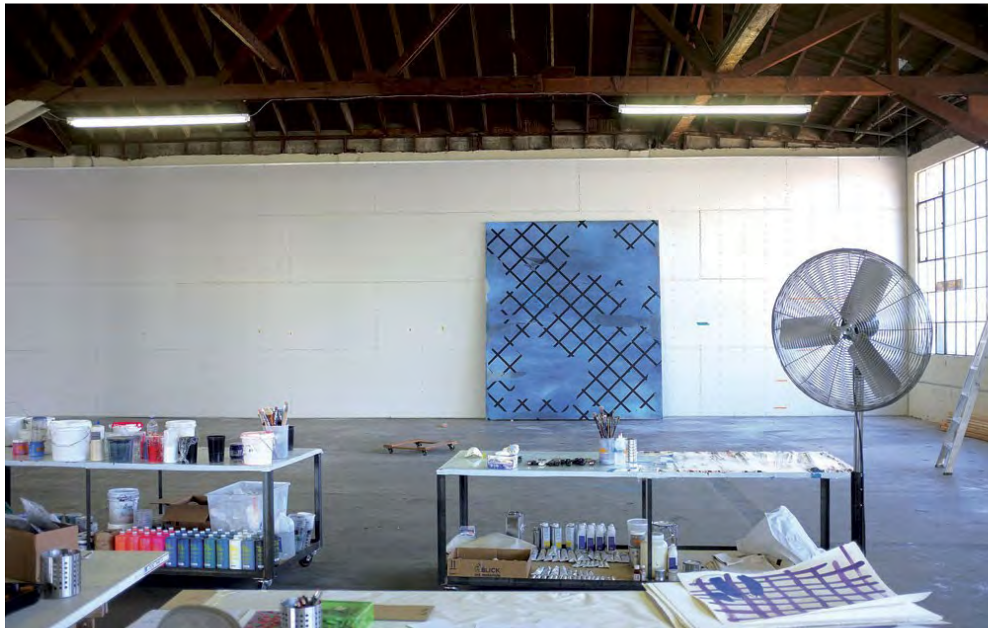
Da das Werk in der Auswahl zwischen den Gemälden besteht, ermöglicht es ein unbegrenztes Wachstum der Größe des Werks. Auf wie viele Arten und Weisen auch immer ich es organisiere oder präsentiere, immer ruft es neue Sinnzusammenhänge und Assoziationen hervor. Es ist eine Alternative zu der Idee des Ganzen. Zur Gestalt. In diesem neuen Raum hier fühle ich, dass ich den Druck in jedes einzelne Bild zurückverlegen möchte, um es trotzdem gleichzeitig als ein Ganzes in der Ausstellung sprechen zu lassen. Kann ich beides tun? Das ist es, was ich ausprobieren möchte. In den Bildern, die du oben in dem anderen Studio[4] gesehen hast, arbeite

Stech, Fabian. "Laura Owens: I Like the Idea of Not Knowing." *Kunstforum International,* May/June 2013, pp. 182–95.

ich über ähnliche Ideen. Alle Bilder werden zusammen in einer Ausstellung hängen, aber sie sind nicht ein einziges Werk. Um diese Idee zu unterstreichen, werden die sieben Gemälde von den Worten „pavement karaoke" durchzogen, das ist ein Event, das ich hier in Los Angeles organisiere. Eine Idee bringt so die andere hervor und es gibt einen Bezug zwischen den beiden Orten, etwas wie den Maluntergrund eines Undergroundevents in Los Angeles… er ist verdeckt und nicht sichtbar, wie das Event, das man in London nicht miterleben oder sehen kann.

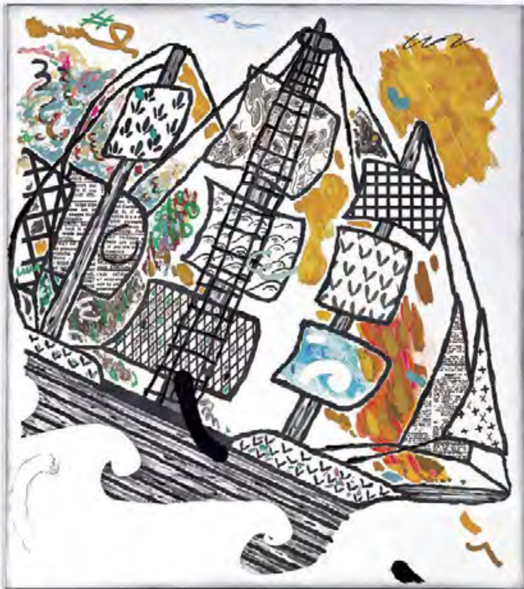
Du hast einmal gesagt, dass man mit Bildern zusammenleben können muss. Was hast du damit gemeint? Ich habe es so verstanden, dass ein Bild so etwas ist wie eine Person.

Ich denke es ist eine Qualität, die ich dem zuschreibe, was ein Gemälde tun kann und was es tun sollte. Es ist kompliziert, aber meinem Gefühl nach muss ein Gemälde den Betrachter durchdringen und darf dem Betrachter nicht erlauben, es selbst zu durchdringen. Es kann nicht. Das ist wichtig für mich und vielleicht schreibe ich dem Gemälde wirklich eine anthropomorphe Qualität zu, wenn ich sage, es sei wie eine Person, trotzdem kann es kein passives Objekt sein, in das du hineinsiehst wie in ein Fenster. Das ist völlig uninteressant für mich. Ich denke, dass man die

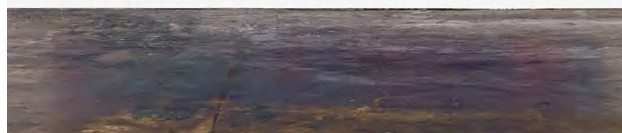


Atelieransichten LAURA OWENS am 13 August 2012 (Alle Werke sind in Arbeit und noch nicht fertiggestellt) © Fabian Stech. Courtesy Laura Owens

Stech, Fabian. "Laura Owens: I Like the Idea of Not Knowing." *Kunstforum International,* May/June 2013, pp. 182–95.



LAURA OWENS, oben: Ohne Titel 2013, Zeichenkohle, Acrylfarben, Flashe Vinylfarbenund Öl auf Leinwand; unten: Ohne Titel, 2013, Öl-Acryl und Flashe Vinylfarben auf Leinwand, beide: 349 x 304 cm; Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise



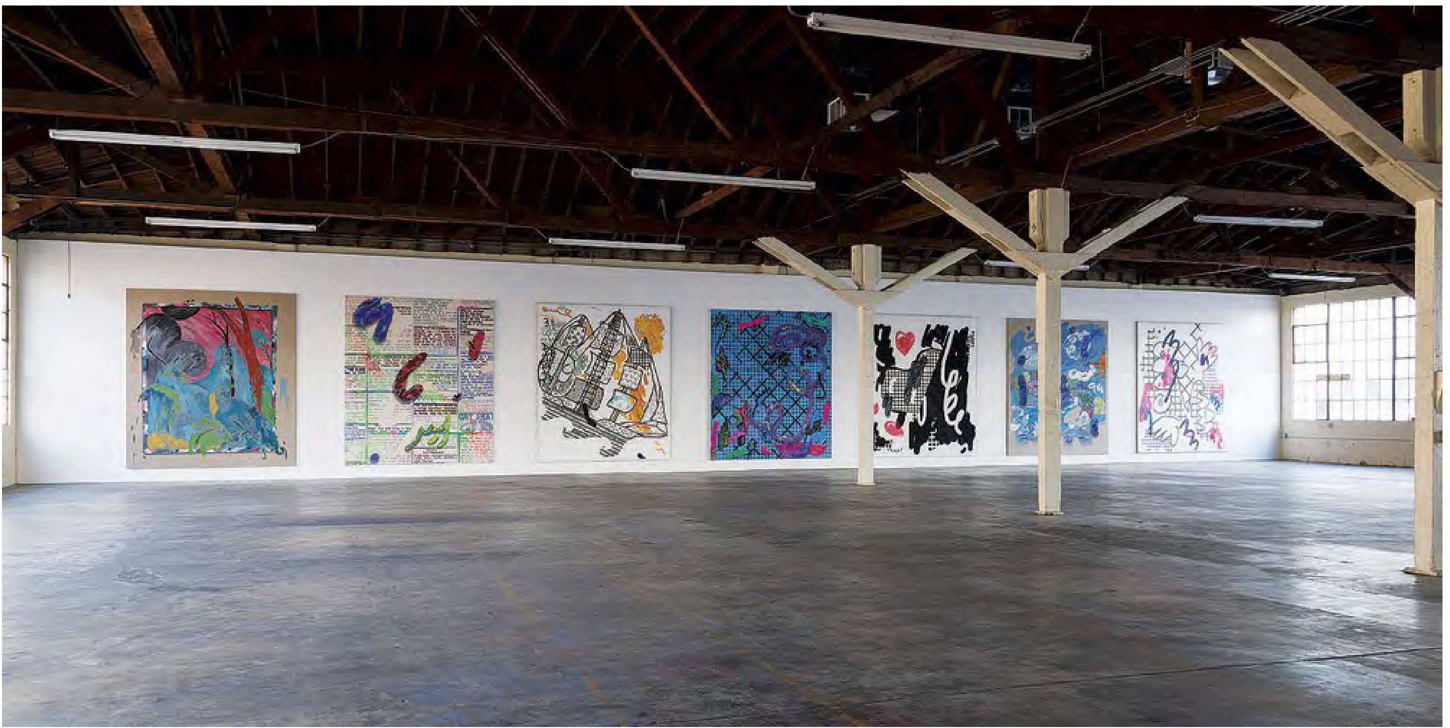
Idee des Fensters für Gemälde benutzen kann, weil es sich um eine historische Idee handelt, mit der man herumspielen kann. Es ist jedoch für mich völlig uninteressant, dass Gemälde Fenster in eine passive andere Welt sein sollen. Es gibt andere Dinge, die ebenfalls wichtig sind, wie der Diskurs um das Gemälde, Malerei als eine Ethik oder die Art und Weise wie Gemälde Raum schaffen. Aber Gemälde müssen den Raum aktivieren, in dem sie sind und sich nicht passiv in die Mauer zurückfallen lassen. Ein Gemälde muss den Betrachter im Raum motivieren und mit ihm interagieren.

Gibt es da einen Bezug zu der Tatsache, dass alle deine Bilder ohne Titel sind? Ist das auch eine Möglichkeit die Gemälde direkt auf den Betrachter einwirken zu lassen?

Keines meiner Bilder trägt einen Titel. Alle meine Bücher haben Titel, aber keins meiner Bilder hat einen Titel. Früher fand ich es besser, den Betrachter in die Verantwortung zu nehmen, weil ich mit Ideen von Abstraktion und wiedererkennbaren Bilder herumspielte. Es war zu einfach, der Sprache zu erlauben eine vorbestimmte Erzählung zu installieren. Was dazu kam war, dass ich schnell einen Horror vor den Titeln bekam, die mir einfielen. Die Titel fügten den Bildern oder den Erfahrungen, die ich mit den Bildern hatte nie etwas hinzu. Obwohl das so ist, bin ich ein Fan von Künstlern, die ihren Werken Titel geben. Eine meine Lieblingsausstellungen war im Jahre 1995, die von Jorge Prado in Los Angeles, in Tom Salomon's Garage. Die Werke bestanden nur aus Lampen und das Blatt mit den Titeln war fast wie eine Liste, eine Erzählung, die man aufschreibt, fast wie ein Gedicht, ohne direkten Bezug auf die Lampen. Die Idee, dass Titel selbst Objekte einer Ausstellung sein können, gefällt mir, sie waren fast wie ein eigenes Werk. Die Titel weisen den Werken einen Ort an und sind sehr spezifisch. Ich stehe darauf, wenn sie als Objekte benutzt werden, Mechanismen zu Distanzierung und Trennung von den Werken. In meinen eigenen Werken habe ich jedoch keine Beziehung zu Titeln.

Das kommt vielleicht daher, dass du Malerei eben nicht eine Sprache, sondern eine innere Sprache genannt hast?

Nein, das nun wirklich nicht. Ich denke, wenn du dich auf Malerei als innere Sprache beziehst, hört es sich so an, als wenn jeder wüsste, was ein Bild bedeutet. So etwas wie eine kommunizierte Sache und das führt den Betrachter in die Irre und führt dazu, dass er außen



Ausstellungsansicht, 12 Paintings by LAURA OWENS, 356 Mission Road, 2013. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise

vor bleibt und keinen Zugang zum Bild findet. Die Leute sagen dann: „Ach, ich weiß nicht genug über Malerei, deshalb kann ich sie mir nicht ansehen, und ich weiß nicht, was ich darüber sagen soll.“ Aus diesem Grund schrecke ich davor zurück, von der Malerei zu sagen, dass sie eine eigene innere Sprache hätte. Wenn du und ich entscheiden würden, dass Malerei eine eigene innere Sprache hätte und wir würden sie benennen, dann wäre das wirklich entfremdend. Es würde bedeuten, dass es eine Sprache gäbe und wenn man außerhalb des Diskurses stände, oder in einem anderen Kontext, dann hätte man keinen Zugang zur Malerei. Wäre es eine Sprache, dann würde das die Determination, der sagen wir mal „Worte“ mit sich bringen, und es hieße, dass wir alle zustimmen. Ich glaube nicht, dass es eine wie auch immer geartete Übereinstimmung gibt. Es gibt Dinge, die Malerei tun kann und wir können darüber sprechen! Ich verstehe, was du meinst, wenn du sagst, Malerei hätte eine innere Sprache, aber dahin möchte ich nicht mitgehen, denn es verlängert ein Paradigma, dass es Leuten, die sich für konzeptuelle Künstler halten, einfach macht zu sagen: „Oh, Malerei – ich verstehe davon nicht genug, um darüber zu sprechen, denn Malerei hat ihre eigene Geschichte und Sprache und die verstehe ich nicht.“ Und das ist, denke ich Schwachsinn!

Weil Malerei in gewisser Hinsicht immer evident ist?

Ja, das meine ich. Ich glaube nicht, dass man besonders viel Vorinformation braucht. Es ist interessant, Informationen zu einer Arbeit zu haben, aber meistens nicht notwendig.

Warum interessieren dich Bücher so?

Ich hatte vor vier oder fünf Jahren in einer Bücherei mit einem alten Buch so etwas wie eine Erleuchtung. Ich nahm es aus dem Regal und sah es mir an. Es war die Qualität des Papiers und der Eindruck, den es vermittelte. Es war der Erfahrung sehr ähnlich, die ich mache, wenn ich mir ein Gemälde ansehe. Dasselbe passierte mir von 14 Jahren mit Stoffen. Ich war im Art Institut in Chicago und bin nach unten in die Textilabteilung gegangen. Ich hatte dort sofort den Eindruck, dass es Gemälde seien und dass Stoffe für mich Teil des malerischen Formenkanons sind. Ich konnte frei wählen, sie der Geschichte der Malerei hinzuzufügen und sie als Gemälde behandeln, was die Möglichkeiten der Malerei dann erweiterte. Dasselbe gilt für Bücher, sie sind geschaffene Objekte, die eine eigene Art des Sehens und der Absorption hervorrufen, die der Malerei sehr ähnlich ist. Obendrein war ich auch des Rahmens und Hängens der Bilder an die Wand überdrüssig. Die Idee, das Papier anzufassen und zu halten, gefiel mir. Auch bei Zeichnungen begann diese Art von Unzugänglichkeit, sie an die Wand zu hängen, mich zu langweilen.

LAURA OWENS, Ohne Titel, 2011, Öl- und Acrylfarben, Flashe Vinylfarben, Glimmerflocken auf Leinwand, 9 Teile : 243 x 213 cm pro Leinwand, Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise

Gibt es in deinen Werken so etwas wie Ironie? Ich konnte nie so etwas wie Ironie in deinen Bildern sehen.

Das Wort ironisch wurde in den 90igern benutzt und das war genau die Zeit, in der ich begonnen habe auszustellen. New York fühlte sich noch als Zentrum der Malerei und es gab einen starken Glauben in konservative Tropen oder Eigenschaften der Malerei. Sobald etwas auftauchte, das diese Glaubenssätze in Frage stellte, egal ob es der Gebrauch von einfachen Wandfarben war oder die Tatsache nicht aus New York zu sein oder nicht bestimmte Farbtöne zu benutzen oder sich auf so etwas wie Illustration oder etwas von außen kommendes, wie eine historische Haltung zu beziehen, wurde das als ironisch bezeichnet. Zu der Zeit fühlten sich die Leute bedroht, weil sich Malerei veränderte und sich das Zentrum weg von New York

Ausstellungsansicht LAURA OWENS - Monica de Cardenas Galleria 2012, Leinwand, Garne auf Leinwand, verschiedene Abmessungen. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Monica de Cardenas Galleria.

Stech, Fabian. "Laura Owens: I Like the Idea of Not Knowing." *Kunstforum International,* May/June 2013, pp. 182–95.

verschob und viele Leute wollten sicherstellen, dass es so etwas wie Aufrichtigkeit in der Malerei gäbe. Sie wollten sich nicht mehr von der konzeptuellen Malerei ausgetrickst fühlen und vielleicht kam es auch nach dem Rückschlag gegen den Neo-Expressionismus. Es war lächerlich, denn wer würde all diese Zeit und Energie investieren, um ein Bild zu malen, das nichts als der Fake von einem Gemälde[5] ist. Und selbst wenn man so argumentiert, auch ein gefaktes Gemälde bleibt immer noch ein Gemälde.

Ist Ironie nicht die Tatsache, einen Schritt Abstand von dem zu gewinnen, was man macht?

Das ist das literarische Verständnis von Ironie. Du sprichst über Shakespeare und Hamlet. Das Theaterstück im Theaterstück, das Spiel im Spiel. Das ist interessant. Aber es ist nicht das, was man unter Ironie verstand, wenn das Wort normalerweise in Kunstkritiken auftauchte. Man stellte vielmehr die Frage: „ Ist das wirklich ein Gemälde? Glaubt sie wirklich an die Malerei?" Sie fühlten sich bedroht von Leuten, die die Malerei killen wollten und sich über Malerei lustig machten. Nach deiner Definition ist Manet der ultimative Ironiker.

Für mich bezieht sich Ironie ebenfalls auf Sokrates und sein pädagogisches Ziel, etwas zu verstehen zu geben. Die beweglichen Teile deiner „Clock Paintings" könnten zum Beispiel als ein ironisches Mittel fungieren, um Abstand zu gewinnen.

Ich denke die „Clocks paintings" sind bestimmt von der Idee der Collage und der Idee der Subjektivität in der Geste. Einer Geste wird erlaubt, sich selbst von der Leinwand zu befreien. Ironie hat auch etwas damit zu tun, aber sie ist überlagert von der Idee des Wortspiels. Ein Drängeln und Schubsen zwischen den Teilen, die fragen, wo die Beziehungen sind und wie Sinn hervorgebracht wird oder gibt es keinen Sinn? Ein Ziffernblatt und ein Porträt, wie überlappen sich die beiden Begriffe in unseren Verstand? Was passiert im Augenblick des Erkennens.

Was dient dir als Ausgangspunkt, wenn du beginnst zu arbeiten? Ist es eine Idee, eine Geste oder etwas ganz anderes?

Ich hatte diese Theorie, ich weiß nicht, ob ich sie noch habe, dass es zwei Arten von Künstlern gibt. Jene, denen es schwerfällt zu beginnen und jene die

LAURA OWENS, Ohne Titel, 2007-2012, Gemälde : Öl-und Acrylfarben, Collage, Fäden, Zeichenkohle, mechanische Teile, und Quartzmotoren auf Leinwand. 92 Teile 60,96 x 60,96 cm für jedes Bild.

Stech, Fabian. "Laura Owens: I Like the Idea of Not Knowing." *Kunstforum International*, May/June 2013, pp. 182–95.

LAURA OWENS, oben und unten: Ohne Titel (Alphabet), 2012 (Detail), Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Sadie Coles HQ, London.

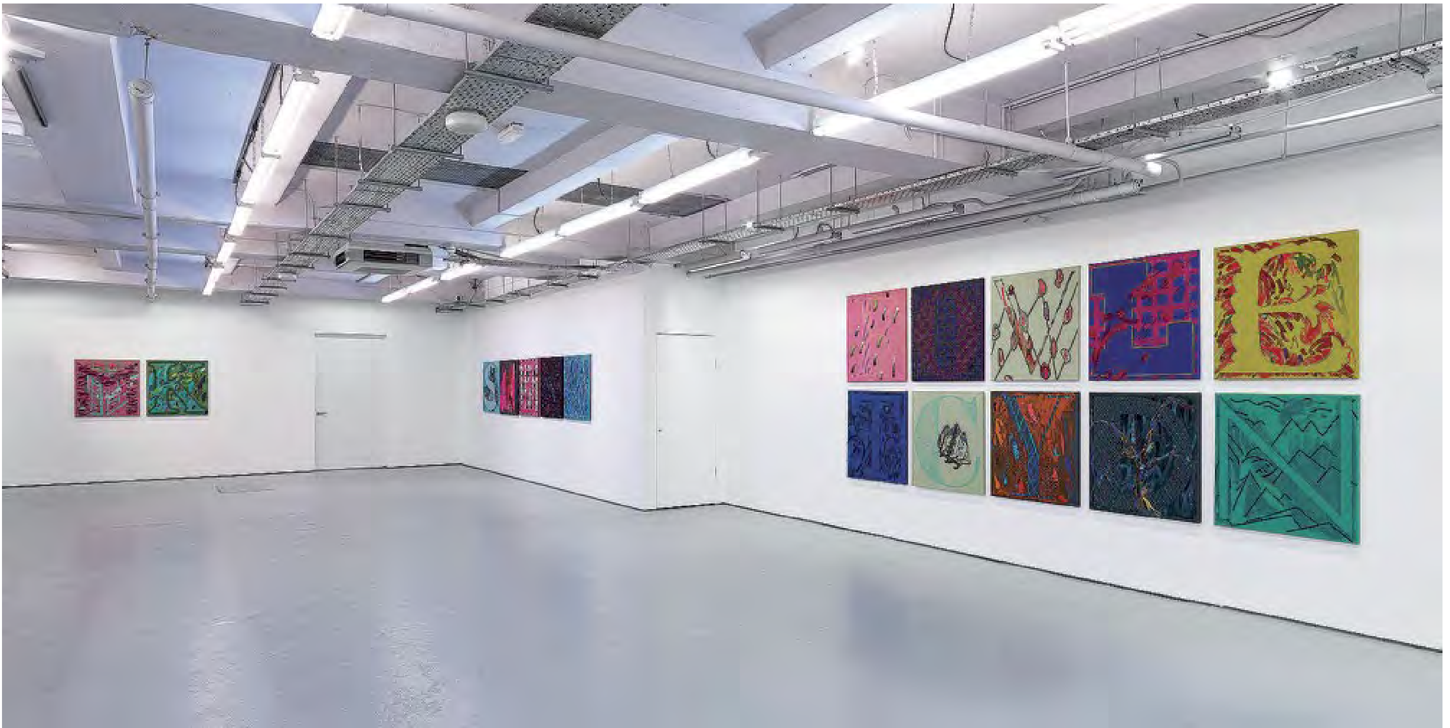
Schwierigkeiten haben, ein Bild zu beenden. Ich war definitiv jemand, der eher Schwierigkeiten zu Beginn eines Bildes hatte. Daraus habe ich den Prozess entwickelt, dass alles ein Gemälde sein kann: eine Person, die in meinem Studio auf und ab geht und mir einen Einfall gibt oder wenn ich einen Schnappschuss mache, oder wenn ich trampe oder in den Urlaub fahre, all das kann ein Bild hervorrufen, auch das Zeichnen, ganz traditionell in einem Skizzenbuch zeichnen. Es kann von überall herkommen. Lässt man solche Einflüsse zu, kommt es zu fast absurden Anfängen eines Bildes. Es setzt einen Glauben daran voraus, wie man das tut, was man tut und versetzt die wirklichen Entscheidungen in den Schaffensprozess der Arbeit.

Ist es auch dieser Prozess, dass alles ein Bild hervorbringen kann, der für die Motive verantwortlich ist, dafür, dass du das malst, was du malen willst?

Das kommt von einem philosophischen Glauben. Ich habe das Zitat nicht vor mir, aber Francis Picabia sprach davon, eine Art von Zerstreuung zuzulassen, nicht diese Art der Wiederholung, emphatisch immer wieder die selben Sachen zu sagen, um sich selbst als Autor zu zementieren. Ich habe im Allgemeinen den Glauben, dass ich nicht vor mir selbst weglaufen kann, so stark ich auch immer versuche mir selbst zu entkommen und versuche andere Räume zu bewohnen, wie die photorealistische Malerei oder andere Sachen. Die Bilder gleiten immer wieder dahin zurück, meine Gemälde zu werden. Es ist mir unmöglich, vor mir selbst wegzulaufen.

Versuchst du, nicht zu malen wie Laura Owens?

Ja, das versuche ich! Auch um es für mich interessant zu machen. Es ist so wie: „Was passiert, wenn du das machst? Was passiert, wenn du alles änderst, was du bisher im Atelier gemacht hast, anstatt weiter an diesem Image festzuhalten. Auch die Mannigfaltigkeit der Techniken, mit denen ich arbeite, kommt aus den Ideen, die der Collage zu eigen sind, die mit Picabia und einem bestimmten historischen Zeitpunkt assoziiert wird. Die Idee der Collage ist, dass du so etwas wie eine Ansam-



Ausstellungsansicht LAURA OWENS, Alphabet. 2012, 4 New Burlington Place, London W1, 09. 10.2012-17.011.2012. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Sadie Coles HQ, London.

mlung von verschiedenen Sehweisen hast, die alle in einem Raum zusammenlaufen und eine dritte Art des Sehens produzieren.

Francis Picabia ist am Ende seiner Karriere nicht verstanden worden. Ist das nicht eine Gefahr für einen Künstler oder eine Künstlerin?

Hast du Angst davor, nicht verstanden zu werden?

Manchmal, vor allem, wenn ich Fragen auf Englisch stelle!

Im Atelier ist das ein wirklicher Killer. Wer soll dich schon verstehen? Das kann nur flacher und flacher werden, bis nichts mehr übrig bleibt. Ich denke, es ist im Atelier wirklich ungesund zu denken: „Wird das verstanden werden?" Das ist die falsche Frage. Wenn es fertig ist, ja, das ist wie: „Was ist das? Was habe ich gerade gemacht? Ist es gut oder schlecht?" Es ist eine Frage von Qualität. Ich kann auf meine eigene Art darauf gucken und entscheiden, dass es nicht funktioniert oder in einem anderen Bild, dass es eben funktioniert. Mitten im Arbeitsprozess darüber nachzudenken, ob verstanden wird oder nicht, was du gerade machst… das wäre schlecht.

Gibt es eine Frage, die dich voranbringt, wenn du arbeitest?

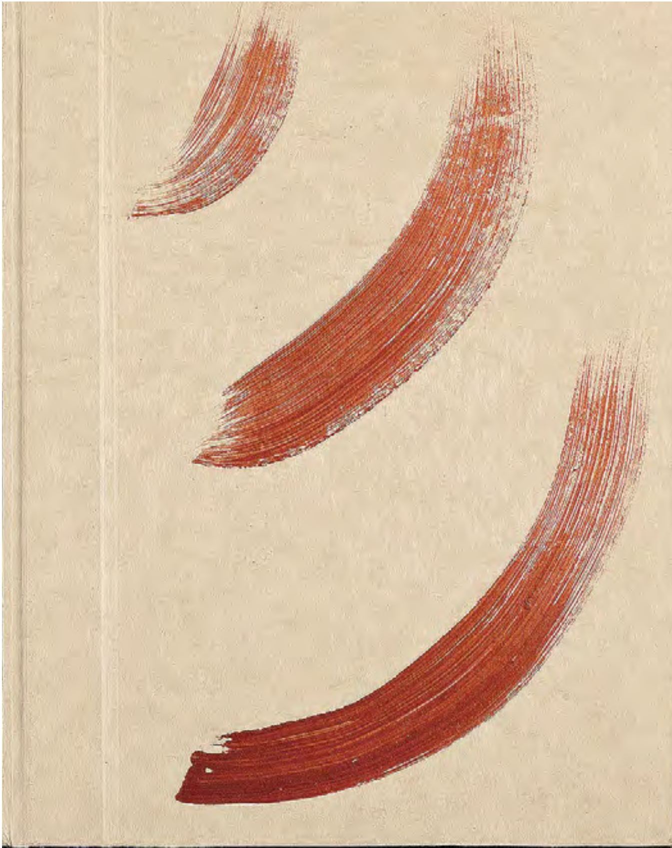
Darüber nachzudenken, was es heißt, dass ein Gemälde fertig ist. Ich denke, dass ist eine der wirklich großen Fragen für ein Gemälde. Was heißt es eigentlich eine Bild zu beenden? Es ist eine der interessantesten Fragen in einem Gemälde, weil sie so stark von demjenigen gefühlt wird, der das Bild malt und gleichzeitig so voller Anspielungen steckt. Du weißt, wenn du zu weit gegangen bist und du weißt wenn nicht.

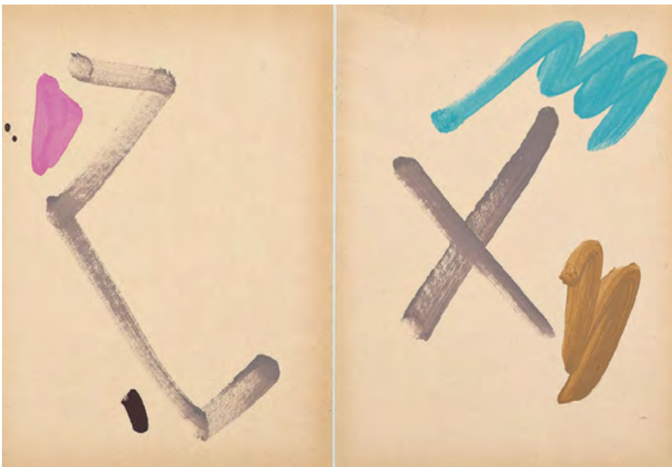
Entscheidest du nur selbst, wenn ein Bild fertig ist? Oder kannst du mit Leuten darüber sprechen, kann jemand eingreifen?

(Erstaunt) Ne, niemand würde je… nein! Ich habe ein starkes Gefühl davon, wann etwas fertig ist. Ich weiß absolut, wann ich zu weit gegangen bin. Je mehr Bilder ich gemacht habe, umso klarer wird, wo diese Linie ist.

Arbeitest du schnell?

Das kommt darauf an, was du mit dem Wort „Arbeit" meinst. Ich denke jahrelang über Ideen nach, bevor sie je in ein Gemälde einfließen. Ich beginne mit Tests, mache Nachforschungen, denke über das Format nach. All das kann sich im Gemälde abspielen aber du siehst es nicht. Es ist ein langer Prozess. Wenn ich zu weit gegangen bin, schmeiße ich das Bild meistens weg. Aber bevor ich ein Gemälde beginne, mache ich viele Studien. Es ist fast so, als würde ich mir beibrin-





LAURA OWENS, Copper 2011. Buckarton, Papier, Flashe Vinylfarben, und Kleber, 30 x 23,5 x 3 cm, Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise

gen, das Bild zu malen, bevor ich es male. Dann weiß ich wirklich, wo es hingeht, zu mindestens 70-80 % und dann kommt das Endstadium, der Teil der Spaß macht. Ich habe dieses Ding, dass ich mir selbst sage, dass ich ein Bild machen muss, auf dem ich malen kann. Ich weiß nicht genau, was das eigentlich heißt. Aber es gibt Malerei, die findet auf dem gemalten Bild statt.

Wie sieht die Rechercheprozess für deine Bilder aus?

In den Bildern hier vor Dir, kommen kleine Ideenteile zum Vorschein, nur um zu sehen, wie sie aussehen. Manchmal zeichne ich und einen großen Teil mache ich auf Photoshop. Ich mache Photos von den Bildern, an denen ich gerade arbeite und gebe sie in den Computer ein, um dort weiter auf ihnen zu malen. Ich benutze einen digitalen Projektor, um das Gemälde auf die Leinwand zu projizieren, so dass ich darüber nachdenken kann. Die Bilder hier vor dir sind keine Gemälde, das sind Studien. Das bin ich, wenn ich herumspiele.

Hier von deinem Studio aus, hinter dem Dodgersstadium, sieht man die Hollywoodinschrift am Horizont. Gibt es einen Einfluss von Hollywood und der Vergnügungsindustrie auf deine Arbeit?

Das spüre ich nicht. Ich hatte einen Job als backdrop painter um Konzertkulissen für Bands wie Rage Against the Machine und andere abgefahrene Gruppen aus einem Industriepark in Südkalifornien zu malen, als ich in CalArts studierte. Es war ein Sommerjob und ich habe gelernt, wie man Bilder projiziert und sehr großformatig malt. Es war sehr technisch. Aber sonst spüre ich keinen Einfluss, nicht wirklich. Ich bin, wie jeder, ein Fan von Filmen, aber ich sehe nicht, wie es mich beeinflusst. Ich habe Bilder gemacht, die Sequenzen im Film ähnlich sind: hier ein Bild und dann dort ein neues 30 Sekunden später. Das ist eine Art filmische Idee.

Wer ist dein Lieblingsregisseur?

Preston Sturges ist einer meiner Lieblingsfilmemacher. Robert Altman.

Du bist aus dem Mittleren Westen nach Kalifornien zum Studieren gekommen.

Ich habe zuerst die RISD[6] in Rhode Island besucht und dort in einem sehr traditionellen formalen akademischen Ostküstenstudiengang studiert. In dem Insti-

tut für Malerei, in dem ich war, habe ich schließlich nur noch Skulpturen gemacht. Die Schule hat uns eine gute formale Grundlage vermittelt. Viele der Lehrer kamen vom Bauhaus. Es war ein rigoroses Grundprogramm, aber wenn es um zeitgenössische Kunst und Malerei ging, war bei Willem de Kooning Schluss. Vielleicht noch ein bisschen Julian Schnabel, aber Warhol war kein Maler und Jasper Johns kein Künstler. Sie wurden nicht anerkannt. Deshalb habe ich mich entschieden, für den Graduate-Studiengang eine Schule zu wählen, die sich stärker auf die Ethik von Minimalismus und Konzeptualismus konzentrierte. Ich habe mich bei mehreren Schulen beworben und mich dann für CalArts[7] entschieden, und es war perfekt. Es war das Gegenteil von der RISD. Sie begannen mit den 70iger Jahren und gingen von da aus weiter. Ich habe CalArts 1994 verlassen.

Gab es einen Lehrer, der dich besonders beeinflusst hat.

Ich denke, alle haben mich beeinflusst. Es war eine Kultur des Pluralismus. Es gab die Erlaubnis, alles auszuprobieren was man wollte, und es zu verteidigen und daran zu glauben. Man wurde wie ein Kollege behandelt und nicht wie ein Student. Es gab keine Hierarchie und auch Undergraduates wurden so behandelt. Wenn jemand etwas Interessantes gemacht hat, dann wurde gesagt: „das ist interessant", selbst wenn es nicht interessant für jeden war. Es war eine Kollegen-Druck-Kultur, hart, aber effizient. Du musstest dich entscheiden, was dich interessierte, und es dann machen!

Gibt es zeitgenössische Maler, die dich beeinflusst haben?

Künstler, die für mich wichtig waren, ich weiß nicht, ob man von Einfluss reden kann, waren Leute wie Charles Ray, Richard Tuttle, Mary Heilmann. Sie haben alle ein Interesse an formellen Belangen, das aus extrem spezifischen Entscheidungen resultiert, die gefällt werden. Es gelingt ihrer Arbeit, durch Abstraktion einen direkten Bezug zu emotionalen und psychologischen Zuständen herzustellen. Und dabei geht alles aus einer spezifischen formalen Praxis hervor.

LAURA OWENS, Stern, 2011, Leinen, Flashe Vinylfarben, Stickerei, Farbstift, Wasserfarben, Bleistift, Acrylfarben und Papier, 43 x 32 x 1 cm.

ANMERKUNGEN

[1] Ausstellungstitel bei der Eröffnung am 20. Januar 2013 war: 12 Paintings by Laura Owens and featuring Twooga Booga.

[2] Clock Painting: Ausstellung auf der 43 Art Basel – Installation von Gemälden und Büchern auf der Art Unlimited 2012 in Basel.

LAURA OWENS, Ohne Titel, 1998, Verschiedene Materialien auf Leinwand.
162,56 x 182,88 cm. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise

LAURA OWENS, Ohne Titel, 1998, Verschiedene Materialien auf Leinwand. 2 Teile:
289 cm x 127 cm. Courtesy bei der Künstlerin und Gavin Brown's enterprise

[3] Ausstellung im Kunstmuseum Bonn vom 22.09. 2010 – 08.01.2012

[4] Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet. Ausstellung von Laura Owens bei Sadie Coles in London vom 09.10.2012- 17.11.2012

[5] …"it's all a fake painting!"

[6] Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Die Hauptstadt des kleinsten Staats der USA liegt an der Ostküste zwischen Plymouth und New York.

[7] California Institute of Arts in Valencia ganz in der Nähe von Los Angeles.

LAURA OWENS
Geboren 1970 in Euclid, Ohio, lebt und arbeitet in Los Angeles

EINZELAUSSTELLUNGEN/ AUSWAHL:

2013 12 Paintings, 356 S Mission Rd., Los Angeles, 2012 Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet, Sadie Coles HQ, London, 2011, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln 2009 New Paintings, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York,2008 Sadie Coles HQ, London, Works on Paper, ACME, Los Angeles, 2007 Studio Guenzani, Mailand, Paintings and studies 1994-2006, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, 2006, Sadie Coles HQ, London Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Paintings and studies 1994-2006, Kunsthalle Zürich, Camden Arts Centre, London 2005 Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo 2004, Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia 2003, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los L.A.; Aspen Art Museum, Aspen; Milwaukee Art Museum, 2001, Gavin Brown's enterprise, N.Y 2000, Studio Guenzani, Mailand, 1999 Sadie Coles HQ, London, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln 1998, ACME, L.A., Crown Center Gallery, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago Gavin Brown's enterprise, N.Y., 1997 Sadie Coles HQ, London,1996 Studio 246 (mit Lisa Anne Auerbach), Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin Gavin Brown's enterprise, N.Y. 1995, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica

GRUPPENAUSTELLUNGEN/AUSWAHL

2012 I hear your voice but not the words, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Moscow, 2011, he boy who robbed you a few minutes before arriving at the ball, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln 2009, 200 Artworks – 25 Years, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen 2008, Kunst im Heim, Capitain Petzel, Berlin, 2007, Thomas Dane Gallery, London 2006, Greene Naftali Gallery, N.Y., 2004, The Whitney Biennial Exhibition, N.Y. Huts, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Contemporary Painting, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville Drunk vs. Stoned, Gavin Brown's enterprise at Passerby, N.Y 2003 Painting Pictures, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg Inaugural Exhibition, Gavin Brown's enterprise, N.Y. 2002, Painting on the Move, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, Cave painting: Peter Doig, Chris Ofili and Laura Owens, Santa Monica Museum, Santa Monica, 2001, The Mystery of Painting, Sammlung Goetz, München, Painting at the Edge of the World, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2000, On Canvas, Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.,Examining Pictures: Exhibiting Paintings, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Hammer Museum, L.A., 1999, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Works On Paper , ACME, L.A. 1999, Duke University Museum Of Art, Durham 1998, Color Fields, Luckman Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, L.A., 1997 Sharon Lockhart, Laura Owens, Frances Stark, Blum & Poe, Santa Monica Project Painting, Basilico Fine Arts and Lehmann Maupin, N.Y. Vertical Painting Show, MoMA PS1, Long Island City Beret International Gallery, Palace, Chicago 1996 Kunstverein, Wunderbar, Hamburg, 1995, Smells Like Vinyl, Roger Merians Gallery, N.Y., 1994 From L.A. with Love, Galerie Praz Delavallade, Paris

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ARTFORUM

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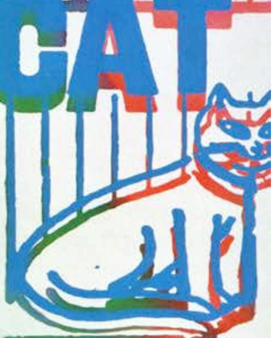

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Optical Drive

SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER TALKS WITH LAURA OWENS

"THE EIGHTIES CALLED, They Want Their Painting Back": This was one of LAURA OWENS's nicknames for a recent work, whose acid neons and dragged filigrees certainly suggest a gleeful bout with MacPaint circa 1984. But then again, the '80s never looked quite like this. Over the past several years, Owens has been making pictures that extend her signature exploration of style and decor, but that appear more like layers of windows or screens—and have been executed at a newly expansive scale. They combine illusion and blankness, texts and rocks, depth and dead ends. Indeed, one seldom sees such a battery of techniques normally found in representational art—photorealistic relief, modeling, figures and grounds, contour, sfumato—in pictures that are undeniably abstract. Critic SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER met with the artist at her new studio, exhibition, and performance space in Los Angeles, 356 S. Mission Rd., where twelve of these paintings debuted in January.

Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2013**, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on canvas, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Below: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013**, charcoal, resin, acrylic, and oil on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

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SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER: This is the first major painting show you've done in Los Angeles in about a decade. How much do you think of it as a single gesture versus twelve discrete paintings?

LAURA OWENS: I was asking myself to do both at the same time, knowing that they are at odds with each other. You have a situation now where exhibitions take precedence over studio practice, and a site holds more weight in discourse than portable works of art like easel paintings. Painting is still painting, but it exists in a post-studio world.

So it can't be a balance. It has to be a tension. And the question becomes, What do you do with that tension? In this particular iteration of me trying to figure that out, a lot of things migrate from one canvas to another, or the scale reflects in some ways the scale of the building. The twelve new paintings are hung closely enough that it's impossible to see only one at a time, but each rectangle still insists on its own completeness.

SLG: Does that tension between the stand-alone painting and the exhibition feel more acute now?

LO: Well, very early on, I went into spaces to make paintings in situ, scaled to a particular wall or measured to fit a space. At a certain point, I exhausted that strategy; it became too clever and too respondent. I wanted to make a discrete painting where everything happens *inside* the painting.

I think that realization came after a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 2000. For me, Gardner was the ultimate installation artist. Nothing in the museum is allowed to move, and every object or painting is looking at each other, bouncing you from one room to another. It was an overload, and I thought, "Could all that happen *within* one painting?" As a result, I made a painting that had a bear and playing cards and all these animals in it that shoot you around with their individual gazes. It was a single painting, but the multiplicity of marks and animals creates internal moments that talk to one another and gel into one whole thing. There is an idea of painting within a painting that runs throughout the history of art, whether it is a Matisse window painting, a Chinese scroll, or Baldessari's *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* [1966–68]. This is not only a formal device but also a way of including disparate pieces of paint, techniques, spaces, and concepts within one painting so that the work requires a participatory viewer. For me, it was a way of addressing the space within the painting not unlike the space of a room or an installation.

Then, around 2009, I somewhat aimlessly started a painting in my studio that immediately made me think, "Oh, no . . . it has to be five canvases," bringing me back again to thinking about what happens *between* paintings in an exhibition. And about a year or two earlier, I had started making books. I don't think I was aware of this at the time, but the impulse for five-out-of-one came out of making books and thinking in terms of pages you could flip back and forth between, allowing memory to play a role in the viewing but also taking the pressure off of any one page to contain all the content. So I made five, but then I thought, "Oh, no, it needs to be seven." It ultimately turned into nine—a nine-panel blue painting with one canvas that is just blank, which I thought was really funny because I had anxiety dreams about the shippers picking up my paintings and the canvases being blank.

SLG: Swinging the pendulum back to single, discrete works (or even multipanel works) also seems polemical now, as though in opposition to recent trends in painting that return to older structuralist or Minimalist questions, evacuating as much as possible out of the painting to the point of asking, What is the minimum threshold of interest?

LO: I guess I'm not that interested in that. I don't know why you would still be making a painting when you start thinking in those terms, of what's the least amount necessary to do. For me, that would be the equivalent of gathering an entire orchestra to perform and only having the piccolo play one note for forty minutes, which is an overt gesture of refusal. Whereas painting *does things*, and why wouldn't you use all the things it does? If you want to make this type of gesture of refusal, people like Michael Asher did that and did it well. It doesn't relate to painting as much as it is a reaction to, or a critique of, the idea of painting.

SLG: Which is not really about taking pleasure in painting's material possibilities. Overt-refusal painting today seems to be more about looking smart.

LO: Most of the art schools I teach at do not include technical training—as though that would be really backward. There's this notion that you should either just know it or not do it. When I was in school, you wouldn't paint if you weren't interested in learning *how* to paint. If you made gestures of refusal with painting, it would have read as irony.

SLG: You've phrased this idea before as a problem of pressure: You see a glaring lack of pressure among your students, for instance, regarding what makes a painting or what painting requires.

"Painting *does things*, and why wouldn't you use all the things it does?"—Laura Owens

LO: There's no pressure. Painting is like a prop, often literally so. People may not admit it, but it becomes a prop to have this *idea* of painting in an exhibition. There's no pressure that anything get thought about or resolved within that frame, it just becomes an index of "and-I-do-this-painting-thing-too."

SLG: Thinking about pressure in another sense, I wanted to ask about your decision to take on this vast new warehouse space in Boyle Heights, specifically with the intention that it be both a studio and a place to exhibit.

LO: It comes out of thinking about how much context changes the situation and imbues meaning. I'm interested in experimenting with unfamiliar formats and entering unfamiliar territory. I wanted to try something different, outside a system of institutional parameters and thirty-day exhibitions.

For about four years, I wanted to make an installation of paintings in a site that I found on my own and on my own time line. First I looked at churches and theaters, spaces loaded with heavy connotations that would have prompted an obvious response, because they have distinctive architectural elements into which the paintings would fit. I decided not to go that route when I found 356 South Mission Road, which is much larger but also more versatile than what I originally imagined. It made me realize that it would be more of a challenge *not* to respond to the existing architecture, but just to make a painting show.

I didn't necessarily want to make such large-scale paintings, but the space calls for that. It would be too ironic to put tiny paintings in this big space. Sometimes you have to do the obvious thing. I also had elaborate ideas of floating paintings between pillars and making them architectural elements; I went through that entire thought process and decided it was too clever, too neat of a trick, and took the pressure off the painting itself. Just deal with making the paintings that are called for in the space: That's actually a harder problem to solve.

But the space also illuminated the possibility of continuing to collaborate with and invite other people to create and perform. In 1997, I had put together "The Eagle Rock Show," which

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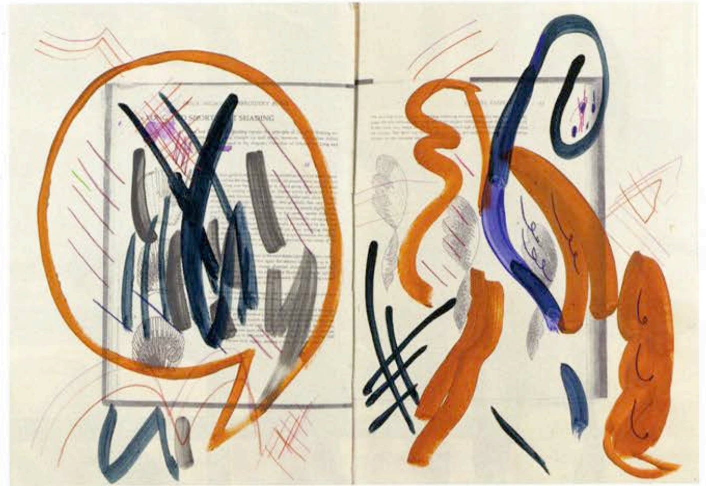
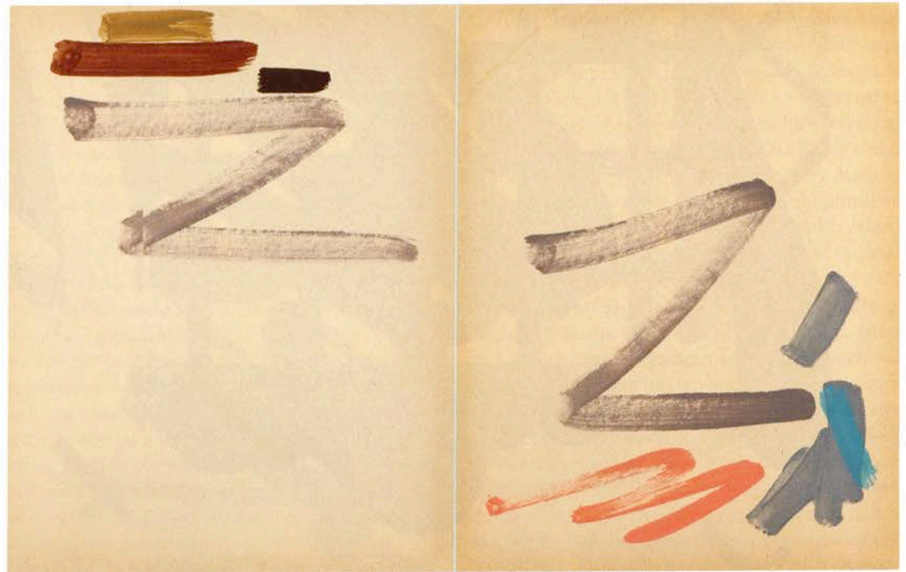
Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2011, nine paintings in oil, acrylic, Flashe paint, and mica flake on canvas, each 96 x 84".

Right: **Cover and spread from Laura Owens's *Stem*, 2011,** linen, thread, embroidery floss, colored pencil, watercolor, pencil, wintergreen transfer, acrylic, paper, closed 17 x 12⅝ x ½". From the work *Untitled* (details), 2009–11, wooden table and twenty-one handmade books, 28½ x 84¼ x 36¼".

Below: **Cover and spread from Laura Owens's *Copper*, 2011,** binder's board, fabric, paper, Flashe paint, PVA glue, closed 11¾ x 9¼ x 1¼". From the work *Untitled* (details), 2009–11, wooden table and twenty-one handmade books, 28½ x 84¼ x 36¼".





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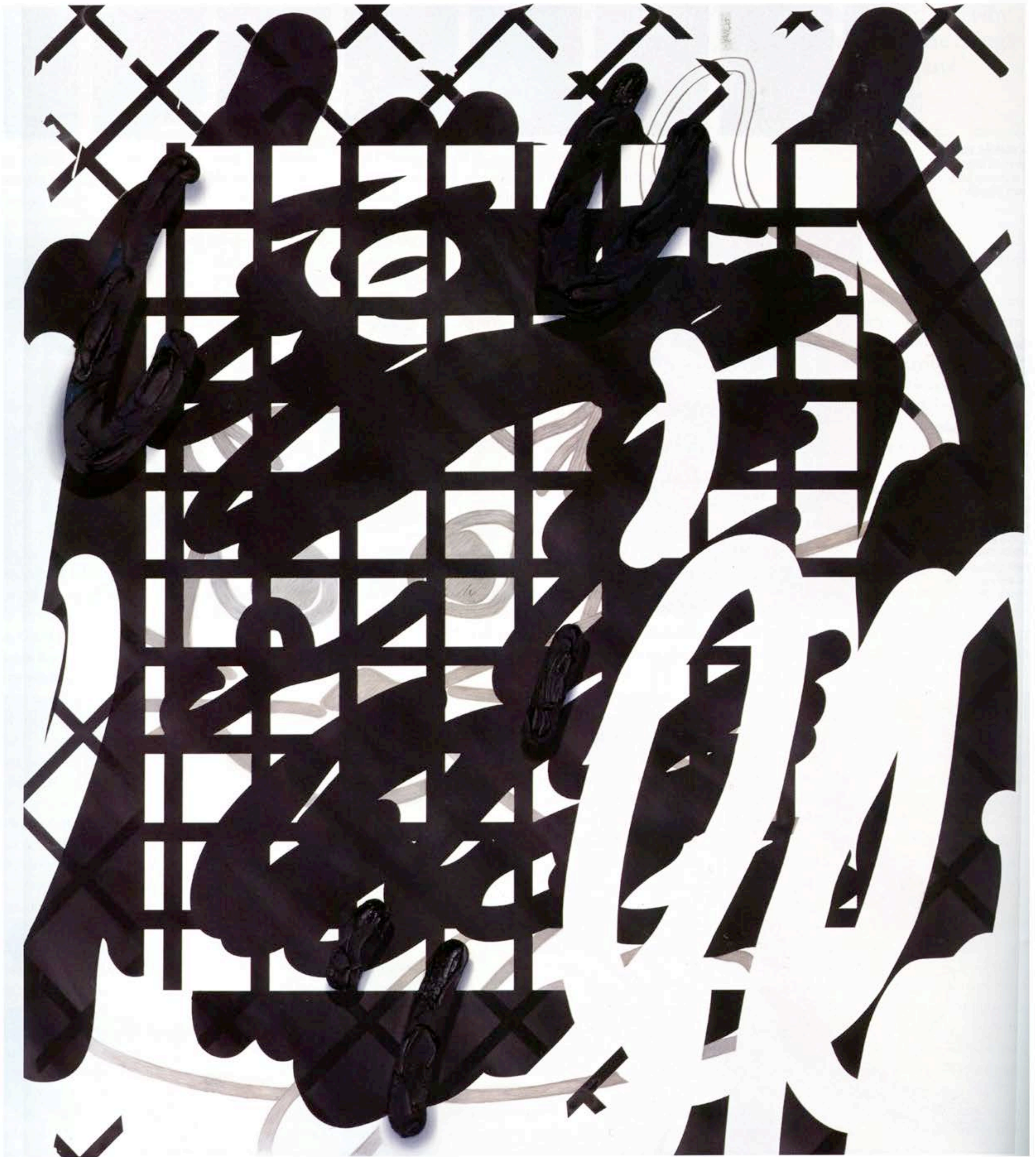

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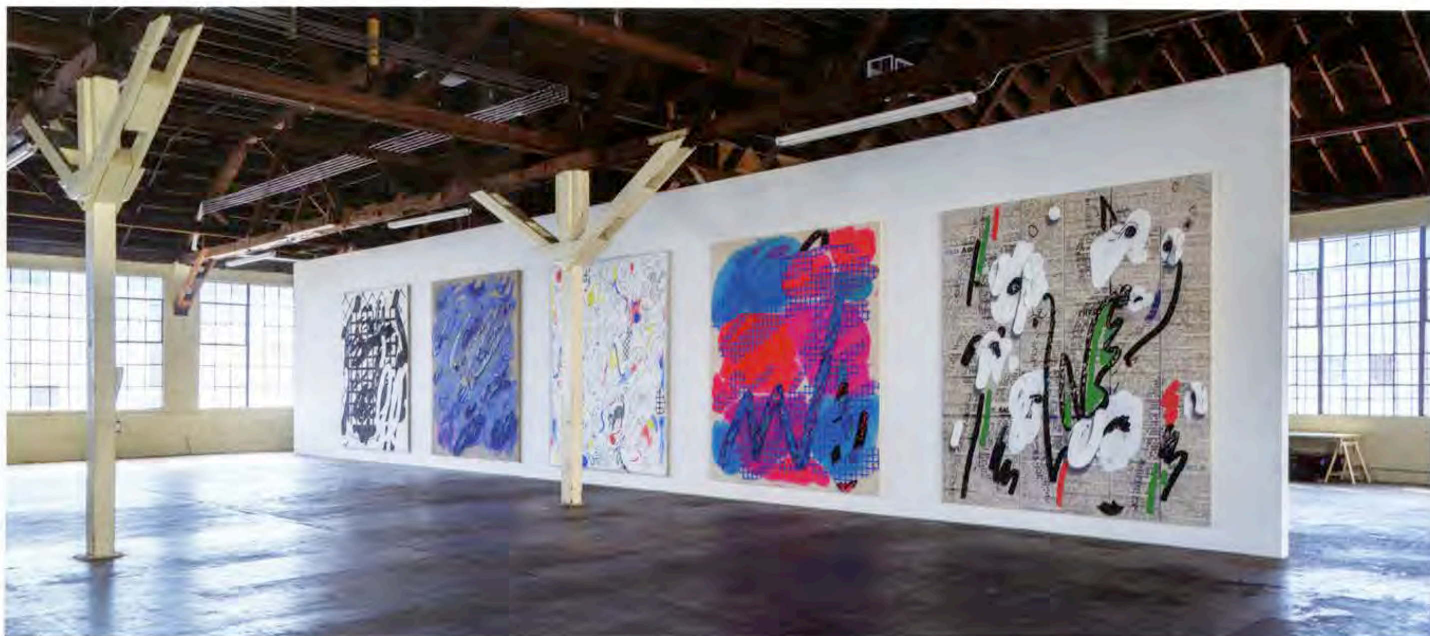

Above: **View of "12 Paintings by Laura Owens," 2013,** 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. From left: *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013; *Untitled*, 2013. Photo: Joshua White.

Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013,** charcoal, pastel, acrylic, and oil on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

was very much in the same spirit. Because there are versatile outdoor and interior areas, this new space allows me to restate in a larger way something I have been interested in doing for a long time, in terms of both painting and bringing people together in a new context.

SLG: So what began as an idea for a site-specific painting installation turned into an entirely new, open-ended, communal space.

LO: Yeah! Ooga Booga [a store specializing in books and multiples] has opened a new outpost in the front room, and we have events and screenings planned. This also opens the door to meeting somebody out in the world and inviting them to come to LA and do what they do here without the bureaucracy of a large institution.

SLG: You've also integrated more collaborative processes, like silk-screening, into the canvases themselves.

LO: It's about wanting to experiment in the studio. I often refer to myself as being in perpetual student mode, teaching myself to make the painting I want to make. The only reason I am using silk screen now is because a studio assistant who was good at it suggested it. And in the same way, after that door opened, I tried to do unconventional things with it, like taking a silk screen and pushing charcoal dust through it. How could we make that work? It requires spending a lot of time doing extra work beyond the canvas and valuing that as an important part of a studio practice.

The charcoal on canvas comes out of wanting to see a drawing on a ridiculously large scale. And for me the idea of charcoal, like watercolor, is interesting because it is one of those mediums traditionally lower than painting on the totem pole. I want to put all these mediums in the mix, as well as combine disparate ways of making marks in one painting, to see what happens spatially.

SLG: In many of these paintings, the space is shallow but also densely layered, signaling the aesthetic of Photoshop but rendered on canvas to unfamiliar effect. What is the process of building these compositions?

LO: At least since I was at CalArts, I've always used painting software—like early kids' paint programs in the '90s—to have another way of making something and to be able to think about color really quickly. But I think what I've started to realize more recently is that the structure of Photoshop is linked to printmaking, and that opened the door to thinking about Photoshop as a natural, conceptual extension of printmaking, where each layer is just like another plate in etching or another screen in silk-screening. CMYK printing makes the connection really clear. Thinking about Photoshop in that context made it feel like a natural part of painting that shouldn't be avoided or, on the other hand, given too much meaning, because it just comes out of hundreds of years of printmaking, as the newest version of it.

The new works don't all start with the computer, though. For that painting there [above, fourth from left], I just stained the background with fluorescent acrylic and Flashe and then took a digital picture of it and worked on the file on the computer; I had a series of layers open with grids and newspaper scans and was drawing on top of the existing "underpainting."

SLG: It's as if you're demonstrating all the different techniques, whether digital or mechanical or handmade, with which one could convey gesture. Gesture is literally writ large, thrown into relief with illusionistic drop shadows, which are a main uni-

"I wanted to try something different, outside a system of institutional parameters and thirty-day exhibitions." —LO

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"I started thinking about Photoshop as a natural, conceptual extension of printmaking, where each layer is just like another plate in etching or another screen in silk-screening." —LO

Left: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013**, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on linen, 11' 5½" x 10'.

Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013**, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on canvas, 11' 5½" x 10'.

fying visual element throughout these new paintings.

LO: Yeah—there's an entire range of ways I am making the drop shadows. They allude to layers, too: I kept saying to myself while I was working, "I need a painting I can paint on." For instance, the landscape after Matisse only has drop shadows on the internally depicted frame, in order to illustrate a breaking of that frame. But in another painting [opposite page], we used many different types of shadows, to see whether that would trip up your vision. Some shapes have soft, fuzzy shadows as if they're farther in front, while other shapes have sharp, tight shadows to insinuate that they are closer to the blue grid background. The pink shape, for instance, has a tighter shadow than the eyeball shape underneath it, which is funny and confusing and, most important, only possible in painting. We also played with color: Where the shadow falls on the blue grid at top is an extremely bright phthalo blue-green instead of a conventional gray. Then, in addition to painted drop shadows, some of the silk screens (grids, newspaper text) also have silk-screened shadows, and on top of all that, there are real physical shadows from the impasto to add to the confusion.

SLG: Is there a qualitative difference in the marks depending on where they originated, whether by hand or mouse?

LO: I have a tablet with a pen that I usually use, but I've also drawn with the mouse. And I drew the gesture shapes directly on the canvas. Some paintings, like the cat painting, began as pencil drawings on paper that I then projected large and traced with charcoal.

The layers and different methods of mark-making all allow and undergo a kind of leveling. I really like the fact that I could take a picture of a cityscape painting that was made by ten kids at an elementary school and then take a picture of a Matisse landscape painting and put them in the same show, appropriating imagery from different sources like putting different marks or mediums within one canvas.

It's a similar thing with the newsprint collage: In those classified ads from the '60s, every desire—the prisoner who wants contact, the people selling their boat, someone wanting to take pictures of nude women, and someone trying to find Terence McKenna—everything is leveled in the form of text. That is how we really experience things anyway, the way we see things.

SLG: You chart a very slippery continuum between what is a brushstroke, what is a gesture, and where both of those things, through a shift in scale, become shapes themselves.

LO: The oversize impastoed gesture marks are made up of large paint strokes and then given drop shadows. They are overdetermined but also undeniably physical. I wanted to emphatically try to inhabit the gesture. The gesture is simultaneously the mark inside the painting, the act of painting, and the decision to rent the space and make the exhibition.

I had asked myself, in a depressed mood: Is it even possible for a woman artist to be the one who marks? At the same time, in 2013, does anyone at all have this ability, or is it an antiquated and sentimental idea? Isn't it interesting that a male orgasm has a DNA imprint that will replicate itself over and over again, reinforcing itself the way language or naming might, but the female orgasm has no use, no mark, no locatability? It can't even be located in time. There's no moment when ejaculate comes out, really. I want to think about how that can be the model for a new gesture. What is that gesture in art, or in painting? The DNA replicant reminds me of the signature, like Picasso's signature on the painting being comparable to sperm. That sounds really gendered, but it's not—I'm specifically locating production that's telegraphing itself, which feels very old-fashioned.

SLG: Instead of telegraphing signature, your focus keeps snapping back to the internal pressures within painting.

LO: This is such a generalization, but it feels like the East Coast and parts of Europe are still heavily invested in the narrative of the artist—who that artist is, the gestures that artist made. Maurizio Cattelan and Richard Prince are each creating narratives about who they are as artists, which makes the object secondary. Whereas someone like Charles Ray, for me, at least, is making an object first. This is perhaps a subtle difference. When an artist makes a gesture about "oh-*and*-I-made-a-painting," it fits more into that first paradigm of the artist's narrative. I'm not against it at all—it's interesting and really fascinating—but it's just not where I'm at right now.

SLG: Because it's so hard to just straight-up *make a painting*?

LO: Well, yeah, it seems pedestrian in some way. I mean, what's the universal signifier of art? I'm going to put my money on a painting. That's just a too pedestrian, too midwestern, democratic, everybody-can-do-it kind of thing. So there is this notion that artists must keep expanding their gestures into different spaces: discourse, theater, music, paint-

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“In the classified ads from the ’60s I use, every desire—everything—is leveled in the form of text. That is how we really experience things anyway, the way we see things.” —LO

Near right: **Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2011**, fourteen paintings in acrylic, charcoal, clock motor, and collage on linen, each 24 x 24".

Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012**, oil, acrylic, Flashe paint, resin, collage, and pumice on canvas, 108 x 84 x 1⅛".

Far right: **Laura Owens, *Untitled* (detail), 2012**, ten paintings in Flashe paint and yarn on linen, each 24 x 24".

ing, you name it.

SLG: In other words, you are countering the popular tendency toward a “networked,” sprawling, heterogeneous, self-narrativizing art practice by staking a renewed claim for attention to medium and materiality—even a new kind of medium specificity?

LO: Many of the artists I recognize as having an influence on me are interested in the actual experience of being with the objects in exhibition, which is different from cultivating a clever narrative around what gestures happened when. I’m more interested in having the experience of being in a certain location and seeing a certain show—existing in that space with the object. There can be discourse that follows from that, like you and I can talk about being at Regen Projects and seeing Charlie [Ray]’s car. But that’s different from, for example, Damien Hirst’s spot paintings, which exist as discourse before anything.

SLG: Emphasizing the physical object in real space—

LO: Is really considered very conservative.

SLG: But I think that’s changed. What may have been considered conservative takes on a newly radical aspect, now that the virtual and digital are so aggressively dominant, to the point that experiencing painting solely as quick-click jpegs is thoroughly accepted as the norm. To insist on the importance of a physical interaction in space with an art object suddenly has the force of a challenging, transgressive demand.

And even beyond that, you’re not only bringing attention to the personal agency involved in selecting a space and conceiving paintings for that space but heightening that experience by making the paintings there as well. Collapsing the studio onto the gallery–exhibition site strikes me as an exciting context most viewers don’t get to experience often enough. Your decision to control the conditions of reception in this way also counters, or at least disturbs, the mindless routine of cyclical gallery shows and press releases.

LO: I was trying to make an invite for the opening of the space, and I didn’t even know what to call it! When you try to make a more public version of what normally just happens among friends, that creates challenges. And that’s kind of the crux of this experiment. How do I keep it really familiar to me, like something I’ve done before—when I would finish some paintings and invite fifty people by the studio—but take it just one little step further and invite everybody and anybody? I still want it to feel like you’re stepping into a space that’s not foreign to the making of these things. Mike Kelley did it. Jason Rhoades did it. It feels like a familiar thing to do in LA, don’t you think?

At the same time, I like that every aspect of this project has been a total unknown. This impulse to make the space versatile and nondeterminant, where areas within the building can be activated in different ways, might invite different groups of people to have an experience. It’s exciting to see what happens without predetermining or naming it as a particular kind of entity. That way it can fluidly turn into a kitchen or a workshop or a bookstore or a dance theater. If a karaoke party sounds fun, we can do that.

SLG: Do you think of the participants in this new site as being the audience? Are community and audience the same?

LO: I did an interview a long time ago with the filmmaker Chris Smith, and one of the questions I asked him, when he was working on his first film, *American Job* [1996], was what it meant for the producers of the film to be the audience for the film as well. There was this idea in Milwaukee, where he was filming, that you just do it—you make the film regardless of distribution because the main audience will be the producers themselves. I’ve been thinking about that for a long time.

I remember being asked in grad school about the political dimension of my work. I would answer that my idea was to propose a way of doing something that values a certain type of doing by the audience in turn. In other words, the best response to my paintings would be if someone went home and made a painting. That goes back to what we were talking about before, because when you privilege the artist’s overarching narrative, you’re saying he’s the one, he’s the one who makes, he’s the one who owns the gesture. When everyone makes a painting, the gesture becomes more anonymous. □

Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. “Optical Drive.” *Artforum* 51, no. 7, March 2013, cover, pp. 231–39.

MODERNPAINTERS

STUDIO CHECK

Laura Owens

IN 2003, AT AGE 33, OWENS became one of the youngest artists ever to be given a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She hasn't had a painting show in her hometown since. "I've made all my paintings here and I've sent them all elsewhere," she says. It is a surprisingly common phenomenon among the city's best-known artists, and Owens recently responded as have many of her local colleagues, from Robert Irwin to Jason Rhoades to Mike Kelley: She set out to find a place of her own.

"It's an idea I've had for two years," she says, "to find a space in L.A. where I could do a show but use the space first to make the show. I looked at a number of contained spaces like churches and movie theaters, but I've done things like that before, situating paintings in a really specific architecture. I decided to go the opposite route with this big, industrial, vacant space: make it a sort of grand, straightforward painting show."

The now-studio and soon-to-be exhibition space, which Owens maintains in addition to a studio behind her home in Echo Park, is a comfortably cavernous brick warehouse on a gritty industrial thoroughfare just east of downtown, with high exposed-beam ceilings and two walls consisting almost entirely of windows. She moved in this past spring and aims to mount the first exhibition—which will include a dozen new large-scale paintings, all in the early stages on the day of our visit—in mid-November.

Then she will pull out and invite others in, retaining the lease but allowing the space to develop an organic institutional identity. Owens mentions the possibility of bookmaking workshops; alternating karaoke nights, concerts, and film screenings; a makeshift residency; and exhibitions of other artists' work. "It's pretty open-ended right now," she says. "There's no name for it or anything like that. That's kind of the point: to see what happens when you're not tied down to a rigid concept of how you show the work." MP

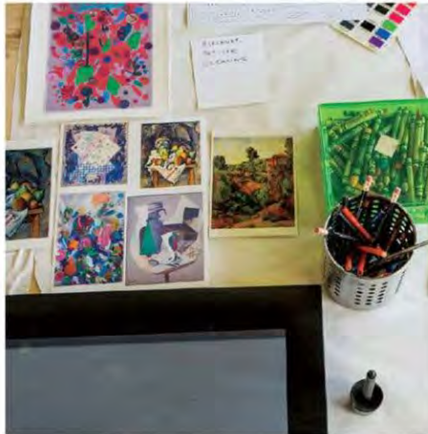
Myers, Holly. "Studio Check: Laura Owens." *Modern Painters,* November 2012, pp. 46–47.

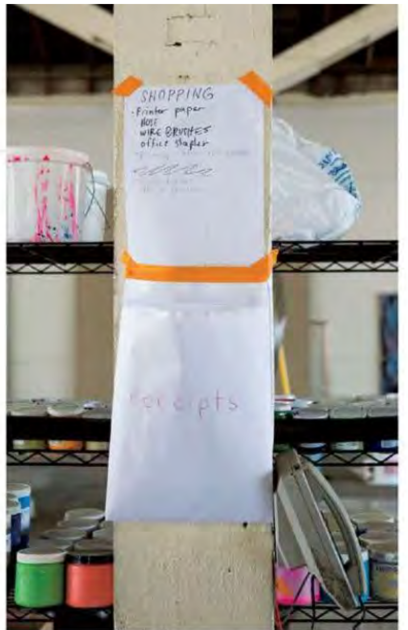
PAINTS

"Usually I mix stuff on these glass tables. Because of the scale I'm working with for this show, the sheer quantity of paint I've had to get is mind-boggling. I've done so much research on how to make the oil paint have volume, because it's astronomically expensive to cover this much painting real estate."

POSTCARDS

"I thought I knew Cézanne, but for the last two or three years I've been having this mind-blowing experience understanding the intentionality behind the decisions he was making, how he slowed it down, and how each mark was so deliberate and yet so casual. It reminds me of the people I'm really in awe of who are still alive, like Mary Heilmann, Richard Tuttle, and Charles Ray—people who have this formal specificity, where there really couldn't be another placement, but where that's not the point, the point is something else. There is this intense paying-attention-ness to the thing that's being made. I think Cézanne is the god of that."



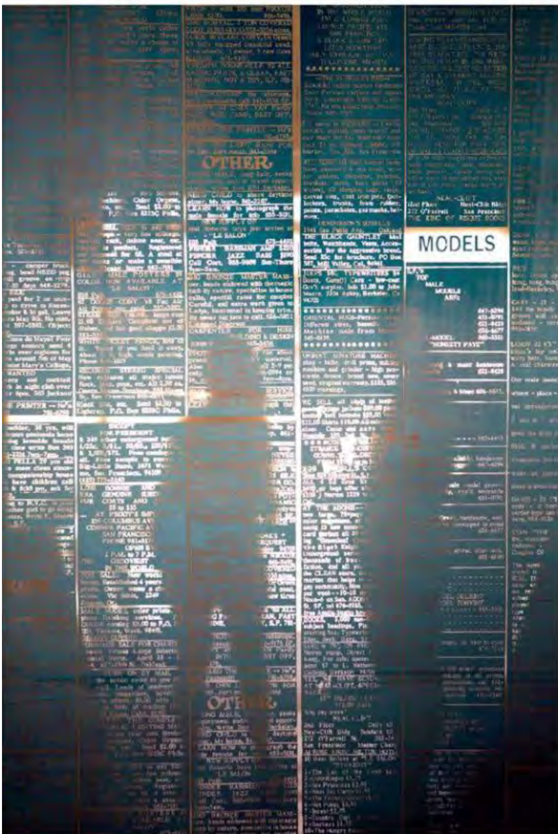


LISTS

"I see the scale of the studio as a temporary situation. It's getting bigger in order to do this project, but I really go crazy if I don't work alone. So I have a part of the day where people are helping me, because I couldn't physically do it myself. I literally couldn't lift the paintings. But I do the real work—the thinking and actual painting—at night, when they're gone, or I tell them to take the day off."

BOOK LAYOUT

"I make books, too. This one I'm doing for a benefit. We just screened on all these pages. The text is from another book I did called *Fruits and Nuts*, which basically comes out of that conservative joke from the 1960s about L.A. being the land of fruits and nuts. I used all these newspapers from the late '60s—a radical newspaper called the *Berkeley Barb*—and I thought the classifieds were so interesting I made these silkscreens of them to make another book."



CLASSIFIEDS

"I'm working on setting up the possibility of something happening. I'm just setting things in motion. I'm working with all these silkscreens, for instance, because some of the people who work for me are really good at silkscreening, so I said, 'If you do that well, let's do that.'"

KARAOKE MACHINE

"With the karaoke machine I've been singing to the paintings. I have this idea that I'm going to imbue the space with intention but then be open to whatever happens. It's like I'm trying to throw wrenches into my work, I think."

Myers, Holly. "Studio Check: Laura Owens." *Modern Painters,* November 2012, pp. 46–47.

Camden Arts Centre / September—November 2006
File Note #16 **Laura Owens**

16

Danny Rolph

Laura Owens

“In seeking to assure myself about what I can be certain of”, wrote Descartes, “my thinking proceeds step by step according to my own rules.” In my opinion, Laura Owens pursues a similar attitude. Her paintings revel in the pleasure of visual signs, methods and attitudes co-existing for and against each other. Qualities that seem initially incompatible and in opposition with each other quickly achieve a rightness that oscillates somewhere between the eye and the mind.

The familiar and the unbelievable aspects of her imagery are underpinned, I feel, by two key elements. The first element is her technical prowess; it is evident in the incredible range of brushwork and surfaces she consistently creates. The second element is an informed, unpredictable and eclectic attitude towards creating a picture. This attitude is communicated through her exploration of the various languages of painting, adding a charged dimension to the characters or situations that inhabit the work, resulting in a variety of pictorial questions. Her paintings are other worlds that operate out of time and context in which stylistic and historic references can co-habit with well-known or little-known borrowed art historical characters. (Laura Owens is as adept at referencing American artists like Florine Stettheimer and Grandma Moses as she is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec or Chinese scrolls.)

Her willingness to experiment with new narratives and methods, often within one painting, is evident in *Untitled* (2002). My first encounter with this work was at Laura Owens’ show at MOCA, Los Angeles, in early 2003. I wrote a note to myself at the time which read: “A large work roughly 7' × 11', *Untitled* (2002) has a magic story-telling quality in which day meets night, a variety of animals go about their business, solid and ghostly trees without leaves occupy a sparse landscape alongside a waterfall on the right that gives the painting a vast depth. The wispy stylised clouds that rise from the waterfall touch the moonlit night sky where a cranky owl with Marty Feldman-like eyes waits and watches on a heavily curved branch that straddles the clouds and the night sky becoming more solid as it awkwardly occupies the centre of the composition going down and falling

Rolph, Danny. *Laura Owens*. File Note #16. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006.

Untitled 2002 / Oil and acrylic on linen / 213.3 × 335.3 cm
Collection David Teiger. Courtesy Gavin Brown

Untitled 2006 / Acrylic, oil and felt on linen
213.3 × 274.3 cm / The Dakis Joannou Collection Foundation

Rolph, Danny. *Laura Owens*. File Note #16. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006.

off the bottom edge at the trunk of the tree. The left-hand branch reaches up through the top of the composition and plays host to a monkey (borrowed from an eleventh-century Chinese scroll) beckoning a butterfly. His three brothers are way off in the background on the right, precariously resting on some rocks and other trees. The trunk of the main tree hides most of the bear who, like the rabbit in the bottom left and the tortoise in the bottom right, stares upwards. The monkeys and the squirrels are doing the opposite and looking downwards. You wander back to the owl who doesn't know now whether to look up or down! Beautifully slight 'rogue' brushstrokes of varying colours that occupy the composition all over are blown around like pollen. Various flora and fauna are strewn around the bottom part of the composition interspersed with scattered playing cards whilst tiny birds occupy the ghostly trees near which deer roam."

Then I looked around at the other work in the show and came back to the painting I have just described. This time I was blown away by the methods Laura Owens had employed, on which I wrote: "Thin washily painted bear next to a greasy, large tree, the rogue brushstrokes that looked like pollen have become oily impasto leaves. An incredibly washy stream touches the sky with its fresh exuberance. Night re-appears brushily on the right behind the trunk and at the top left with a few stylised unrecognisable black shapes. The two main butterflies begin to look enormous, flying towards each other like reckless stunt pilots, under which I now, for the first time, can see the unpainted linen ground." This painting, as you may have gathered from my notes, dazzled and took me to a place without time and

Untitled 2004 / Oil on linen / 46.3 × 53.3 cm
Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner

Untitled 2006 / Acrylic and oil on linen
74.3 × 53.9 cm Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ and collection
Florence and Philippe Segalot, New York

context, its varying narratives undermined and underpinned by an alternative narrative flow.

There has always been a charm and self-mocking quality to Laura Owens' work that re-energises the potential inherent in the act of painting, transforming various time and spatial realities back into an abstracted form. Her pictures have a sleight of hand and, like those of Albert Oehlen or Raoul De Keyser, seem to possess a pretence of ease. Evidence of enjoyment is refreshingly there in the work. I believe there is no irony apparent in her adopting this position, which in turn has created new possibilities or rules for painting to escape the grubby clutches of 'serious' art historical polemics. Genuinely fascinating propositions created in her clever borrowings, samplings or touch have made Laura Owens a very important cultural reference point for a generation of artists, rather like her near contemporary Chris Ofili.

There is a matrix of questions, definitions and meanings in Laura Owens' work that has found and is continuing to find ways to help painting's evolution in the twenty-first century. Her work makes a great claim for the necessity of painting. For me, as another painter, that's pretty hot!

Danny Rolph is a painter based in London. He is represented by Hales Gallery, London and A.R.Contemporary, Milan.

Rolph, Danny. *Laura Owens*. File Note #16. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006.

Untitled 2006 / Acrylic and oil on linen
121.9 × 109.2 cm / Private collection
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ

Design: James Goggin & Sara De Bondt / Practise

Rolph, Danny. *Laura Owens*. File Note #16. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006.

Laura Owens was born in Euclid, Ohio in 1970 and lives and works in Los Angeles. She studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (1992), Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and the California Institute of the Arts (1994). At Cal Arts she met the abstract painter Mary Heilman who was to have a significant influence on Owens, who also cites American folk art as a source of inspiration.

Foremost among the generation of young US artists credited with reinvigorating painting as a medium during the 1990s, Owens has had numerous solo exhibitions in the US and in Europe including Kunsthalle Zürich (2006); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2006); Shiseido Gallery, Japan (2005); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2003); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (2001) and Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (2000).

The exhibition at Camden Arts Centre is Owens' first one-person show in a public space in the UK. Laura Owens is represented in London by Sadie Coles HQ and by Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York.

Reading/Viewing/Listening List Selected by Laura Owens

— Erica Wilson *Crewel Embroidery* Charles Scribner (1962) ISBN 0684106736
— Muneshige Narazaki *The Japanese Print and its Evolution and Essence* English adaptation by C.H. Mitchell, Kodansha International (1969)
— Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* Collier-Mac, 1967 ISBN 0020681208
— Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, *Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* Chelsea Green Publishing ISBN 1931498997
— Stanley Donen (Dir.) *The Little Prince* (1974)
— Marlo Thomas and friends, *Free To Be ... You And Me* Television Cast Recording (1972)
— Frank Loesser *Guys & Dolls* Original Broadway Cast (1950)
— Harry Smith (ed.), *Anthology of American Folk Music* Original Recording Remastered, Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 1998)
— Ella Jenkins *You Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song* Smithsonian Folkways (Audio CD 2004)
— Michael Webster *Lotus Festival* Lovethink (Audio CD 2000)

Published to accompany the exhibition
'Laura Owens' at Camden Arts Centre 29 September–26 November 2006
Organised in collaboration with Kunsthalle Zürich

All images © the artist. Courtesy Sadies Coles HQ, London and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

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ISBN 1 900470 62 4

Cover: *Untitled* 2006 / Oil and acrylic on linen
76.2 × 83.8 cm / Courtesy Gavin Brown

Untitled 1995 / Marker, ink, coloured pencil, crayon on canvas
183.5 × 214 cm / Private collection

Rolph, Danny. *Laura Owens*. File Note #16. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The Unbearable Lightness of Painting

Thomas Lawson

I always think that a good way to open an essay on any artist's work is to offer up a description of a typical piece, thus establishing a set of themes which can then be developed into a convincing narrative of a career. In that spirit I might begin by pointing to a painting by Laura Owens from 1997 that depicts the receding spaces of a picture gallery (plate 3). Awkwardly off-center, a spindly tripod easel partially blocks the view of one of the fictive paintings on the wall. There are no people in the gallery, no student painter at work at the easel, no indifferent viewers watching creation in action or gazing at the works in the collection. Overall the painting is pale, even faint, and as a result the floor appears to rise up as a suppressed image, a kind of silhouetted skyscraper pushing through the deserted galleries. The empty rooms and the latent, almost phallic image of the floor might call to mind an alarming string of overinterpretations, a kind of homage to a dread-infected surrealism, but there is something un-insistent in the way the picture is painted that puts that scenario to rest. Instead it seems rather cheerful and more than a little tentative, as if asking how a work of art begins, and how it ends.

Writing this kind of essay is always difficult. There are so many expectations. The artist wants the work described fulsomely, generously, accurately, and to be placed, with perceptive precision, within or against a particular tradition. The curator seeks something similar, with perhaps more emphasis on the wider view, providing historical justification for the selection of this artist over all others at this particular moment. The readers demand no less, although they might settle for fewer adjectives expressing admiration and a more direct explanation of how the work actually works, how to look at and interpret the evidence given. All this is to be delivered in a style that is crisp and clear and leads briskly to an authoritative conclusion about art and society, with the artist providently offering the crucial lens to understanding our current situation. Overall, what is wanted is an argument, a narrative of positions taken and not taken, an edifice of meaning. This is no easy task when the artist begins each work with the question: What shall I try next?

I might begin with another work then, perhaps a tall, vertical painting from the following year (plate 7). This one has no recognizable imagery at all. Instead, its surface is animated by an endless looping line reminiscent of that Bauhaus-to-Kindergarten classic, taking a line for a walk.[1] In this

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

case the line is made in ink and the spaces filled in with pale swabs of acrylic color. It might remind some viewers of a particular type of artsy fabric design while making others think of the "all-overness" of a Jackson Pollock, here rendered as one-dimensional schema. There is nothing else to be seen except the artist's signature in the top left corner, upside down. This in turn could lead the over-informed to think of Barnett Newman's signatures. Does this mean the work embodies an idea of critique, a pairing of the machismo of Abstract Expressionism with a more feminine idea? One could rest there, but it would not seem nearly enough. In fact the painting would seem to foreclose on such narrow interpretation and offer up something more expansive. And the bigger question being raised seems to be concerned with origins: Who makes a work of art? How does she get started? How does a painting come into being?

Plotting the development of an artist who is obsessed with the difficulty of beginning a new work is a near impossibility. For that artist is always beginning again, only each time with more intimate knowledge of the difficulty. Thus the development is one of false starts, cold starts, quick starts, sweeping flourishes, and sudden stops.

Owens's paintings, which to supporters seem unerringly on-target in their odd mix of knowing charm and destabilizing cruelty, are not always received with enthusiasm. They appear to many to be relentlessly coy about nothing very much, to be taking up a lot of space without delivering sufficient *gravitas*. A feature of the most dismissive arguments against her work—that it is bratty or too studentish—is the lack of specificity, the unwillingness to describe the actual paintings. This strikes me as a significant omission. It is as though the paintings cause these detractors to feel ashamed. Of what? Perhaps of being confounded in their ability to instantly classify, and therefore tame, works of art.

Owens's paintings are not easily classified. They appear awkwardly charming with an open, apparently easy accessibility that proves more and more evasive the longer one looks. Let me begin again, this time with two descriptive passages that appeared in separate issues of *Artforum* several years ago. I do this to indicate the effect Owens's paintings can have and the difficulty of capturing that effect in words. Introducing an interview with the artist, Susan Morgan wrote: "Lines sweep into our peripheral vision, speed along as daringly as fearless schoolgirls sliding on ice, then burst

opposite: *Untitled*, 1998 (detail)

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

unexpectedly into shapes—tiny spiraling volcanoes of color, wavering horizons, or bulky clouds."[2] And in a review, Jan Avgikos wrote:

> [In Owens's] most ambitious "abstract" painting—the one with scoops of "tasteful" colors in pale blue, coffee, lime, and white—the carefree, even subtly euphoric play with paint seduces. The effervescing mounds are animated by an orbital field of painterly marks that spin off into blue space, nuggets of paint that seem to crash in fissures where edges don't meet, and rainbow-variegated smears and squiggles that ricochet around the painting, sometimes spiraling into deep space, at other times slapping up against the picture plane.[3]

These few sentences carry us on a wild ride through a roller coaster of literary effects. Both critics seem to me to offer fairly accurate descriptions of what are extremely elusive works. Morgan captures the exuberant, fun-loving aspect of the paintings, while Avgikos telegraphs their sense of staccato uncertainty. Both offer head-spinning catalogues of colors and actions and variations on descriptions of little lumpy bits of paint. Both describe work that is simultaneously frenetic and serene, suggesting that an out-of-control kineticism somehow produces a dreamy lyricism.

Let me now attempt to describe a newer work, a large, untitled work of 2002 (plate 23) that offers a bucolic landscape that would surely bring a smile to the hardest heart and most cynical eye. The painting is so over-the-top charming that I almost stammer with embarrassment as I begin, for under the scrutiny of language the painting collapses into another string of lists—here of corny clichés. There are trees and flowers, a lot of sky, and some animals. It is with the animals that the trouble with interpretation sets in, for this menagerie is an ill-matched lot, calling for something of a stretch in explanation. There is a bear, a tortoise and a fish, a white rabbit, an owl and some other birds, several monkeys, a squirrel, some deer, and a smattering of butterflies and bees. Some of these creatures are diurnal, others nocturnal; some favor woodland habitats, others prefer the plain. None seem particularly suited to this patch of earth. The land is bleak, yet it supports a surprising selection of wildflowers not exactly in seasonal synchronicity. And as the flowers bloom, the trees, whose barren branches form the dominant armature of the whole composition, seem wintry, even blighted. The overall picture delivers a spectacle of an ideal world that may or may not be benign. Not a simple landscape then—more a catalogue of landscape attributes. Maybe I need to search for ways to talk about landscape painting as a kind of halfway house of representation, a kind of painting that depicts the seen, veers into abstraction, and is potentially full of allegorical meaning. Can I push it and claim

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

it as a real allegory, an update on the arcadian pastoral? The playing cards in the foreground, with their suggestion of fickle fate, might suggest such a reading, but then again...

The composition of this work is dictated by the pattern of the tree branches and animated by the exchange of glances between the enchanted creatures. The surface of the work is an encyclopedia of painterly marks and procedures. There is the inky stain of the monkey, the acrylic washes of sky and land, the strange emulsions of the trees, the oil paint worked virtuoso-style and as simple dabs to depict wildflowers. The space of the painting rushes from a represented distance to the actual surface of individual marks and back again. This is a weird, airless space—both open and claustrophobic, expansive and simply flattened out. It begins to seem as if Owens is willing to use every item, every trick, every gesture from the repertoire of painting history, but not to make a polemical point. Instead she seems eager to insist that she is not making any such claim. She appears to want to liberate the work from meaning and do so in an unironic manner.

Untitled, 2002 (detail)

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

Thus we might begin again: Owens's paintings are challenging and difficult. They are each quite particular, not conforming to any notion of serial production or thematic development. They insist on being looked at, closely and over time. They demand an attentive gaze, a careful accounting of parts. They sometimes seem smart-alecky, but are also often very earnest. They resist analysis.

Every artist faces the dual problem of ends and means: what to do and how best to do it. This may sound trivial, maybe even obvious, but no art is easily won, and no artist can begin work without an idea to motivate her. That idea may involve a subject or a procedure, but once certain decisions are made, other things tend to play out automatically. For instance, an engagement with a particular material process means that it may take precedence over subject matter, consideration of the role of the viewer, the relationship of art to society, or any other motivating idea. Here are some of the issues facing an artist who decides she wants to paint: First there is the entanglement in a long tradition, which may—according to many observers, assorted pundits, and opinion makers—have run its course. Buying into these so-called endgame theories or not, no painter can be blind to the horrifying ease with which various techniques and strategies come to seem vapid and pointless after the briefest of exposures. The history of twentieth-century painting is a history of various kinds of resistance and refusal, all too often followed by a capitulation to the repetition demanded of all successful marketing strategies. The collapse of rigorously intellectual, non-representational painting into bland decoration is the easiest example. But we also know well the deflation of the rhetoric around the figure into sentimental coyness, while the in-between genres, landscape and still life, seem forever caught on a seesaw of triviality and non-meaning.

And then there is the issue of influence. Solutions to the problem of painting have been so hard-won that they cannot easily be handed on. There is an intimation of this with the difficulty seen in the followers of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, who so often seem like also-rans, not ambitious enough. Many of the fiercest arguments in the New York art world of the 1940s reverberated with the recognition of this problem—how to make painting anew after Picasso. And the difficulty was only more pronounced in the second half of the century with Pollock, Newman, Philip Guston, and Jasper Johns—all apparently inimitable. The battles were fought as theirs alone, the victories individual and often temporary. As a result attempts to form a school around a style of painting keep on leading to a collapse into pastiche. Thus the emergence of the postmodernist solution, the preemptive pastiche

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

we might call "the Gerhard Richter syndrome," a method whereby the collage/appropriation/quotation of a wide variety of styles, images, and procedures creates an effect of tragicomic despair by turns melodramatically dark and giddy with a silly enthusiasm.

Such is the understanding of the plight of painting in New York and Northern Europe, an understanding weighed down by the heaviness of deterministic theories of history. In such an atmosphere, in which the shadow of the apocalypse is ever present and thus always slightly ridiculous, skepticism undercuts high-seriousness and reduces it to a joke. The heavy light of New York painting, once sublime, in time becomes merely absurd and overwrought.

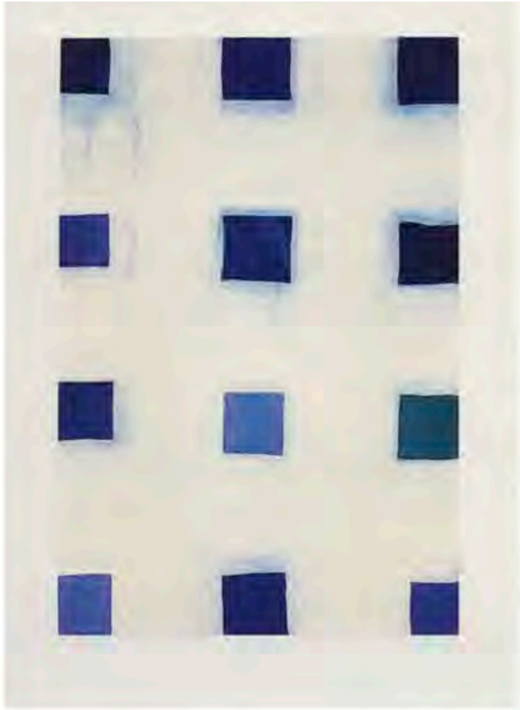
Against this the lightness of the West Coast appears unencumbered and free. Here the great overlooked tradition—encompassing the deadpan of Edward Ruscha and the goofiness of Billy Al Bengston, the serenity of Craig Kauffman and the acuity of John McCracken—has never been seen as quite serious enough. The bright, hedonistic light of Los Angeles painting offers a generous invitation to the viewer to participate, to play. The paintings, in all their diversity, tend to be about being there, in the studio, in the gallery—alive and free of dread. This is a tradition more aligned with that of the Mediterranean, in which it is the privilege of visual art not to show consequences.

Owens echoes this when she says, "A painting should fit into your life. I think that I picked up that idea from Mary Heilmann and her way of working. I met her when she was a visiting artist at CalArts, and she had a profound impact on me. Although she's extremely serious about what she's doing, she has a very casual approach to making a painting."[4]

There, in a beautifully understated observation, is the difference. Although Heilmann is now based in New York, she remains in attitude a West Coast artist. There are two things important about her approach to painting: a carefree relationship to the idea of subject matter and a concern for the intricacy of arrangement. Heilmann is not weighed down by New York's evolutionary theory of art, with its predetermined plot.

> [Her] brand of "postmodernist-affirming modernism" does not call for the end of history but continues to write a different, non-evolutionary story that takes pleasure in playing and mixing. Her paintings are traces of painting's past and allow us to establish a necessary analytical distance to this past as a historically directed process without

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.



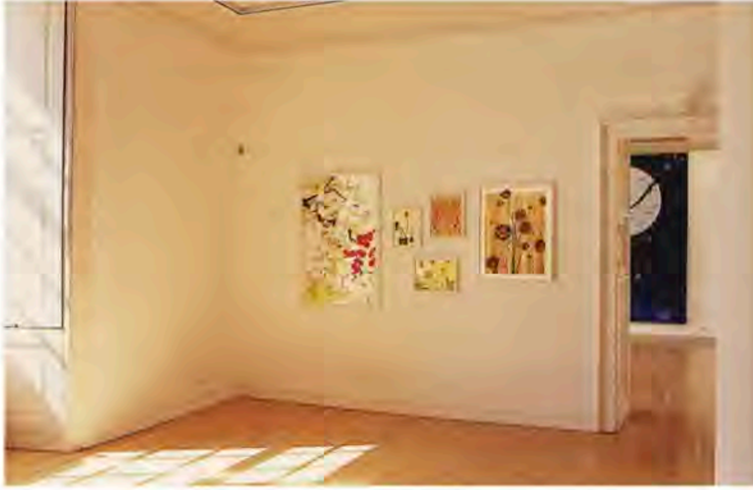
> actually losing contact with it. Heilmann's painting does not get stuck in its analytical commentary nor does it persist only as a speculative theoretical attitude. Her paintings always reveal a space where painterly surprises, personal memories and emotions can co-exist.[5]

This is a formalism of sorts, but not a reductive one—something rather more open-ended.

It is this open-ended quality that resonates with Owens; it is in seeking her version of it that she is able to articulate the specific nature of her own defining oppositional stance. (I write this from a belief that all contemporary art develops from a resistance to a prevailing understanding of the world.) Owens's resistance is to a specific form of language, one she feels to be entrapping. She works against interpretation and for a privileging of the visual, and especially of the visual as manifest in the painted mark. Is this a return to formalism? Certainly not in the academic sense, but perhaps it is in some way akin to the erotics of vision espoused by Susan Sontag in the early 1960s.[6]

Mary Heilmann
Blue Angel, 1996
Aquatint; edition of 40
40 1/2 × 28 1/8 inches
Spring Street Workshop

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.



Another way of looking at these paintings is to consider them in terms of place, how they sit in the world. By this I mean both how they represent the space we inhabit and how they inhabit the real space of the gallery. What is the physical relationship between painting and viewer?

When Owens was invited to have an exhibition in 2000 at Inverleith House in Edinburgh, she traveled there to decide what to show. The gallery is a graceful Georgian house: a simple, well-proportioned rectangle of stone and glass atop a slight rise that gives the rooms on the main floor a sweeping view over parkland and the distant city skyline. These rooms have the high ceilings and tall windows of their period, and as a result are suffused with light. Paintings look very good in these spaces. After seeing the gallery, Owens was convinced she had to include new work that would acknowledge and respond to its elegance and the distraction offered by the view out the windows.

Her decision was to paint two landscapes, one a broad, expansive view of hills and loch (plate 18), the other a vertical moonscape partially obscured by a cherry-blossom branch (plate 17). It was a sly decision, remarking on but not quite making fun of the romance of the Scottish landscape and its attendant painting traditions, the exoticism of the botanical gardens within which the gallery sits, and the situational aesthetics of international exhibition-making.

The paintings are stunning, more aggressively imagistic than most of Owens's previous work. Both are serene, saturated with atmospheric color—the pinks and pale blues of the mountains at dusk, the

Installation view, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden
Edinburgh, 2000

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

darker blues and blacks of the night sky. Both are articulated by the bare branches of a tree blocking the giant orb of sun or moon, creating a foreground space for the viewer to inhabit and providing a frame for the view in the classically romantic, Caspar David Friedrich vein. Both also feature an homage to Japanese art and garden design, not just in the cherry-blossom imagery but also in the sweeping lines and color schemes. Yet again the contradictions: the paintings are quite acid, the pinks and blues not quite in harmony, the relationship to space not so accommodating or so comfortable. They confront each other, and the viewer, with an irreconcilable difference. Although they look right, they are not at home.

What medicine does all this sugarcoating disguise? Does the viewer feel laughed at for liking this, for falling for the schmaltz? Well, yes and no. Talking in her studio, Owens asks if I saw Charles Ray's Halloween decorations some years ago. I hadn't, so she describes, with appreciative glee, a lumpy bush in the artist's front yard brought to animal life with a set of googly cardboard eyes. This acknowledgment of an almost guilty pleasure, the recognition of the power of cliché to please us in an uncanny way, to bring us outside ourselves, is central to her work. As Mungo Thomson has argued:

> the work is a farcical representation, rendered with pathological sincerity, of what art is supposed to look like. All the cues are present to signal "painting": if the raw materials of the medium aren't being trotted out—unpainted canvas and pigment straight from the

Untitled, 2000, installation view, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 2000

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

tube—then the historical record is being used as raw material. Clichés abound in Laura's paintings: allusions to the traditions and archetypes of Modernist abstraction, landscape, figuration, assemblage, the romantic, the maritime, and the postmodern, all figure in. The work seems to want to see how deeply the tropes of painting, and of looking at paintings, have been culturally absorbed; how well-traveled the path is from original to standard to generic.[7]

The connection to aspects of West Coast painting, and in particular to the West Coast-inspired work of Heilmann, rings true on a gut level, but it would be hard to draw direct parallels. Can we draw a lineage? Talking about the large doodle painting I described earlier in this essay, Owens admits to an admiration for the textile designs of the Chicago Bauhaus. This might allow us to infer a link to that tradition of women artists who sought ways of making abstraction concrete, connected to traditional cultures and daily life. But her 1998 series of beehive paintings (plates 8 and 9) hold this notion at arm's length. These paintings are around six feet tall, almost square, and nearly identical. In each the image of a large beehive and handful of buzzing bees is laid out against a beige ground. The hive is a dome shape shaded in simple blocks of browns, ochres, and oranges—the colors of the 1970s. Over this the bees are drawn with extruded paint in what has become an Owens signature, looking a bit like needlework. As a result of this complex of references the pictures have a homespun, handcrafted feeling, like the work of an embroidery class. They don't exactly come across as a celebration of women's work, but neither are they a critique nor a put-down. They offer a more fond acceptance, resigned to what is there. The whole is an exercise in uninflected delivery that, amplified by the repetition of the series, might be taken as Warholian, but without the cynicism.

Another artist Owens has mentioned with admiration is Florine Stettheimer, whose 1920s dreamscapes with social bite, animated by a complex *contrapposto* of painterly styles, certainly seem congenial. Stettheimer's technical playfulness, so often mistaken by the overserious for amateurishness, finds a kindred spirit in Owens. The sexy, mischievous fun in the earlier artist's abrupt line and thick impasto—similar to the contemporary ceramic work of Beatrice Wood, another in Stettheimer's and Marcel Duchamp's quick-witted circle—has sometimes been dismissed as camp. But as Linda Nochlin, writing about Stettheimer, says: "there is justification for seeing Camp—in many ways a fiercer and more self-assured continuation of the half-petulant, half-parodic foot-stamping poses of

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

fin-de-siècle Decadence—as a kind of permanent revolution of self-mocking sensibility against the strictures of a patriarchal tradition and the solemn, formalist teleology of vangardism."[8]

This seems a helpful idea to keep in mind when looking at Owens's pair of monkeys from 1999 (plate 11). These are two tall canvases, matched up like huge sentinels at a gate. The gate here is the back wall of the gallery; the space being protected is that privileged area against which artist and public both cast their dreams. The guardians of the imagination in this case are not mighty giants or fabulous beasts but a pair of monkeys smiling cutely at each other across the void. The paintings are funny, even silly, but also offer a consideration of relationships and possibilities, of decisions not made.

A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people, and floods

Florine Stettheimer
Heat, 1919
Oil on canvas
$50^{3}/_{8} \times 36^{1}/_{2}$ inches
Brooklyn Museum of Art. 57.125
Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

others with an amorphous unease. There is about these hours spent in transit a seductive unconnectedness. Conventional information is missing. Context clues are missing.[9]

This is Joan Didion describing the dislocated space of our city, the space that denies the narratives that drive our idea of the metropolis. This is what makes us suspect we do not live in a real place. Such a suspicion drives many, especially those from more traditional urban backgrounds, to see the city through eyes of abject dread, to understand the spirit of the place as malign. But, as Didion notes, others find the lack of a driven narrative exhilarating, even liberating. Such is the space Owens describes.

One way to understand this space is as freeway space, a carefully engineered space that is never truly known, a space moved through. Driving on the freeway we are anchored by the seat of our pants to a sense of being in the present, but we are never sure exactly where we are. We are conscious of all that is around us—gaze concentrated ahead and flickering to mirror behind, peripheral vision somehow aware of other vehicles—but we are not recording what we see, not looking. Then suddenly

Untitled, 1999, installation view, Sadie Coles HQ, London, 1999

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

we notice something—an exit sign, a flashing light. Perhaps we catch it in time, perhaps not. This is the space of Los Angeles driving, of sort of knowing and following the flow of street and traffic, almost lost but confident of finding the destination.

Owens consistently plays with perception and the methods painters use to manipulate perception. The eye is constantly being led astray, teased into an understanding that does not pan out. The spaces she configures are elusive, to be navigated by intuition rather than knowledge, for the knowledge does not add up. Different paintings contain elements of linear and atmospheric perspective, illusionistic shadows, *repoussoir* effects. In some areas paint soaks deep into the fabric of the canvas, in others it remains startlingly on the surface. Consider a recent painting, a square desert landscape in taupe, green, and blue washes with strange sponge effects and cacti drawn in outline with extruded paint (plate 26). The great unfolding space of the high desert is here collapsed onto a spare but decorative surface of painterly marks. Signs of interiority are used to describe the great outdoors in such a way that one could get seasick.

In such paintings the artist describes a journey but refuses to lead us to a destination. She is not interested in that kind of lesson. Her work does not offer a neatly wrapped message, for it is about something more complex, more human, than a preconceived idea. It is about the wandering curiosity necessary to make art and the daily challenge implicit in the decision to paint for a living. As she describes it, this is about "Waiting until it gels, sitting through the pain. Like the hard part of meditation."[10] She is talking about the inertia of the studio, the weight of expectation, which brings about an overwhelming urge to lay down and stop. And then there is the exhilaration of a new beginning.

Owens offers a simple, generous kind of comedy, accepting the treasures of the given, relishing the conditions of here and now. This is a subtle act, requiring droll precision with an unflinching gaze. On the surface it is an entertaining and sweet art form, but it is also an art of cruelty towards accepted notions of taste and decorum. It offers a hard look at what painting is and how its practice and reception might fit into daily life. It offers a grace in the present, a lightness of being, of touch, of thought.

1. "It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk." *Paul Klee: The Thinking Eye; The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, ed. Jürg Spiller (New York: George Wittenborn; and London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 105.
2. Susan Morgan, "A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work," *Artforum* 37, no. 10 (summer 1999): 131.
3. Jan Avgikos, "Laura Owens at Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *Artforum* 37, no. 5 (January 1999): 119.
4. Owens, in Morgan, "A Thousand Words," 131.
5. Martin Prinzhorn, "Images as the Symptoms of Painting: The Antitotalitarianism of Mary Heilmann," *Afterall*, no. 5 (2002): 51.
6. "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." See the conclusion of Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" (1964), reprinted in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 14.
7. Mungo Thomson, "From my Junkyard to Yours," *Parkett*, no. 65 (2002): 85.
8. Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive" (1980), reprinted in *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), 102.
9. Joan Didion, "Pacific Distances" (1979–91), in *After Henry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 110.
10. Laura Owens, in conversation with the author, September 2002.

opposite: *Untitled*, 2002–03 (detail)

Lawson, Thomas. "The Unbearable Lightness of Painting." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 13–27.

Plays Well With Others

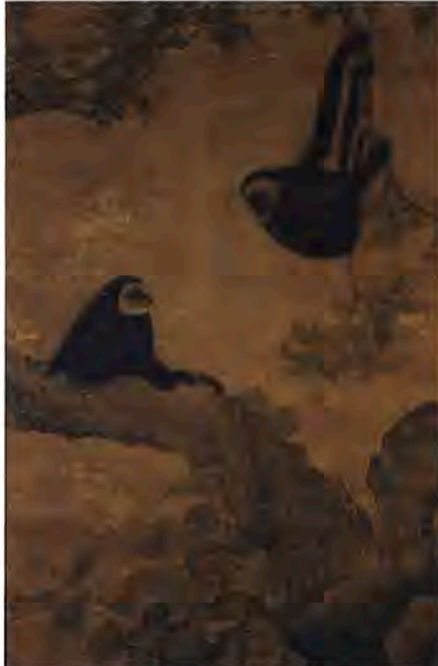
Paul Schimmel

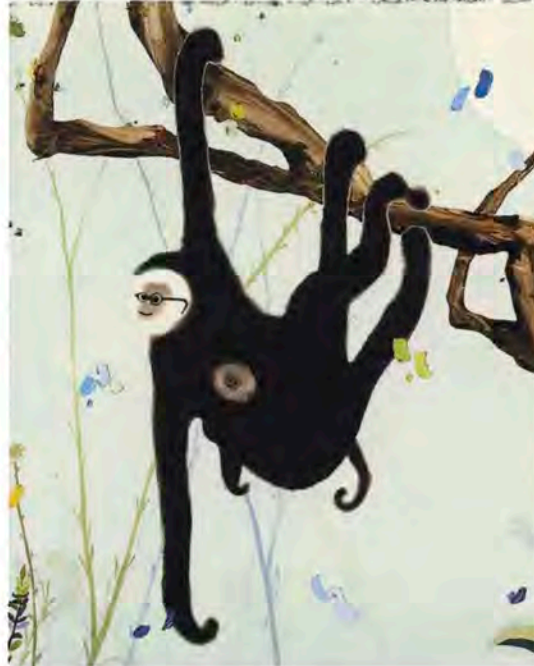
Laura Owens is first and foremost a painter whose works conceptually question the very nature of the medium. The first time I visited her studio, I noticed she had set up a ping-pong table in the midst of a group of several paintings and drawings in various stages of development. She remarked that she played a lot of ping-pong with her brother and that her skills were highly developed. Ping-pong is not an inappropriate metaphor for her methods, which find her bouncing back and forth across art movements, histories, styles, and ideologies. Hers is an art predicated on balancing intuition and intellect, encouraging multiple voices, and leveling hierarchies. It is an art imbued with a desire to move easily and at will across high and low, East and West, personal and social. In contrast to the macho heroicism that bolstered modernist painting and the glint of celebrity that flickered around so much painting of the 1980s, Owens's approach is surprisingly modest and easy-going. She describes her practice as porous, and her work attests to the ease with which imagery and ideas flow in and out.

Although Owens's sources are probably more varied than those of most artists, her work is all the more notable for its lack of pretense and its honesty about those sources. Unlike many postmodern artists, whose works are characterized by the seamless appropriation or cut-and-paste of various preexisting elements, Owens makes no effort to cover up her inspirations or to couch them in irony—nor does she limit herself to borrowing from others. The commingling of various tropes and techniques that has been a hallmark of her work since her student days echoes the spirit of collaboration evident in her community-based activities and her work with other artists.

Owens draws from such diverse sources within craft, high art, and folk art that abundant references coexist in even the most reductive works. Color Field, Op Art, Pattern and Decoration, and New Image painting inform many of her early works; for example, an untitled 1995 painting explicitly invokes Kenneth Noland's stripe paintings.[1] During the early 1990s, critical dismissal of such movements was common. This disdain was based in part on a suspicion of decorative painting, which has remained one of the most disputed aesthetic terrains in recent art history. From the 1960s to the present, the conceptualism of Marcel Duchamp—not the explosive decorative impulse of Henri Matisse's Fauvists—has been the dominant mode. Although much can and has been made of Owens's embrace of

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.





disreputed late twentieth-century art movements, these references have all but disappeared in her work over the past four years.

During the late 1990s, Owens moved toward a greater appreciation and exploration of work by artists and artisans who are, in some cases, anonymous. Attracted both by the extraordinary skill and the lack of ego or an identifiable "I" from which the work emanated, Owens cultivated a particular appreciation for Chinese and Japanese landscape painting and printmaking. These aesthetic traditions represent the transcendent, spiritual qualities of nature through a highly developed vocabulary of subtle washes and economical brushstrokes. Owens also looked at the art of Japanese folding screens. The makers of these technically masterful and sublimely beautiful works are mostly unknown, except for the great Japanese landscape artist Hiroshi Yoshida, whose influence is most evident in one of Owens's paintings from 2000 (plate 18).

In addition to Asian art, Owens draws inspiration from American, English, French, and Italian embroidery. Her affinity for this medium extends to her childhood and the needlework she made with her grandmother. This family tradition ultimately led her to explore the embroidery of the Ottoman

Anonymous
Monkeys in a Loquat Tree, eleventh century
Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk
65 × 42½ inches
Collection of the National Palace Museum
Taiwan, Republic of China

Untitled, 2001 (detail)

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.

Empire, Japanese country textiles, and the textiles of Afghanistan, India, and ancient Peru. Embroidery, with its rich and dimensional quality, is in some ways texturally equivalent to her application of paint, which often looks as if it has been stuck onto the surface of the canvas. For example, her untitled beehive paintings from 1998 (plates 8 and 9) feature bees whose black and yellow stripes were made by squeezing paint directly from the tube. The source for these works is an embroidered pillow she picked up at an estate sale.

As much as Asian art and embroidery captivate Owens, she is nevertheless indebted to the work of European and American artists. For example, *Le lit* (1892), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's extraordinary painting of fin-de-siècle French prostitutes in bed, is the source of a work from 2000 (plate 20). Yet Owens's image is third-hand, since Toulouse-Lautrec had, in turn, borrowed from Henri Gerbault's cartoon entitled "*Les quinze joies du mariage—La parole est à madame*," which appeared in the French popular press in 1891. The influence of American artists such as Horace Pippin, Grandma Moses, Edward Hicks, and Florine Stettheimer can be seen—at least superficially—in the flat, decorative quality of Owens's earlier works. These artists, all outsiders in one way or another, each developed a uniquely American style that did not derive directly from European art. Owens also

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Le lit, 1892
Oil on cradled panel
$21\frac{1}{4} \times 27\frac{3}{4}$ inches
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Antonin Personnaz bequest, 1937

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.

gravitates to radiant, spiritual works such as Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings and Charles Burchfield's watercolors, which—like Chinese landscapes—imbue nature with magic and symbolism. To find a true kindred spirit, however, Owens need only look to the late nineteenth-century artist Henri Rousseau, from whom she seems to have inherited a sense of celebration and reverie, as well as a certain guilelessness. The spirit of Rousseau permeates the idyllic landscape in one of her paintings from 2002 (plate 23), which Russell Ferguson describes as follows:

> The work has a double life, the parts of which are separate, yet deeply connected. On one level, it's a picture of a better world: a peaceable kingdom where all of nature co-exists in idyllic harmony. On another, simultaneous, level, it's a painting: an elaborately composed arrangement of paint on canvas that is inevitably part of a complex dialogue with the whole history of the medium. There is a constant back and forth between the creation of a pictorial world and the act of painting itself.[2]

Not surprisingly, Owens is an avid museum-goer endlessly attentive to both images and techniques. As much as she studies classic works housed in the great museums, she also visits often-overlooked museums and galleries specializing in traditional and folk arts. During our studio visit, she revealed

Henri Rousseau
Exotic Landscape, 1910
Oil on canvas
51¼ × 64 inches
The Norton Simon Foundation
Pasadena, California

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that her favorite museum collection belongs to The Barnes Foundation. Even though the Barnes collection includes many of the greatest masterpieces of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, including works by Georges Seurat, Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Vincent van Gogh, the social and political agenda that shaped its acquisitions and their display resonates most with her.[3] She is intrigued by the idiosyncratic presentation of some of the most revered examples of modern European painting in proximity to Native American pottery, German folk drawings, Pennsylvania German decorative furniture, and Southwestern textiles, as well as ceramics, metalwork, and sculpture from Mexico, China, Africa, Greece, and Rome. The Barnes collection represents a holistic approach that Owens strives for in her own painting. All art forms are valued equally and appreciated for what they represent, not just for the artists who made them.

In 2001, through a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Owens was given the opportunity to work with a similarly eclectic collection. The museum is "laid out as a ritualistic procession of various cultures—Spanish, Asian, Italian, Dutch—in order to measure and present an unrelenting series of revelatory reliquaries of civilization,"[4] within which Owens was invited to stage one of her cross-cultural collaborations. During her residency, she produced a number of watercolors and paintings that referenced works in the museum's collection. One watercolor lifted an image from a piece of Italian embroidery; another work borrowed from a Filippino Lippi drawing titled *The Young Christ and Saint John the Baptist Embracing* (c.1497–99); and a large monkey painting featured a badger taken straight from one of Gardner's kimonos. These historical treasures also prompted Owens to generate some of her own iconography—like bats flying over telephone poles—to add to the mix. As curator Jennifer R. Gross explains, "Owens, like Gardner, in her practice of making images through her creation of a swap meet of cultural reference, reinvests the forms of paintings with new resonance. She reclaims them from their fate as retired hacks by placing them in a new space. Her gambit is the creation of an artificial landscape for painting akin to Gardner's construction of a synthetic culture within her Museum."[5]

This reluctance to lay claim to a fixed position might at one time have been attributed to youth (certainly it is characteristic of much student work) but is now an integral aspect of Owens's methodology. Her eclecticism might have been taken as a symptom of indecision—the product of a wandering mind or a lack of discipline—had it not evolved into a profound ideological expression. Owens's apparently unfettered approach to painting and the openness with which she gleans from the work of others is devoid of the ego that has marked much painting of the recent past.

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.

Besides her tendency to layer stylistic references, Owens paints paintings within paintings. One work in particular, completed just a year after she graduated from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1994, shows an interior dominated by a number of single-point perspective lines representing floorboards leading toward a wall constituting the upper fifth of the composition. A highly modulated forest green, this surface is evidently the wall of an exhibition space. On it are hung over sixty paintings in various shapes and sizes, which include references to Chinese landscape painting, hard-edged abstraction, Color Field painting, and folk art. There is even a painting of the painting itself—which, instead of eclipsing the others, is one among many in a salon-style installation.

Featured in her first solo exhibition at Rosamund Felsen Gallery in 1995, this painting reveals much about who Owens was and who she has become as an artist. The exhibition depicted in the painting includes contributions by her mother and brother as well as various friends and associates, who painted in some of the squares on the wall. The result of this cooperative venture is a collection of odes to artists Owens admires, in addition to the autonomous (and nonexistent) works that were the whims of her collaborators. Understandably, given the personal nature of this work, Owens has refused to part with it. She acknowledges it as the foundation for her conceptual strategy, which counters traditional ideas of the painter's heroic isolation with collaboration.

Untitled, 1995
Oil, acrylic, enamel, marker, ink, and colored pencil on canvas
72 1/4 × 84 1/4 inches
Collection of the artist

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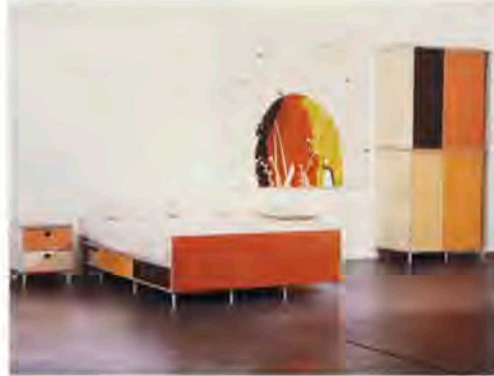

Owens has consistently worked with other artists both in organizing exhibitions and in collaborating on individual works of art. While still a student at CalArts, she organized exhibitions of work by her friends and colleagues. In 1994, for example, she co-organized "The Happy Show" with Monique Prieto, a Los Angeles painter who is among her oldest friends. The title took on a playful irony in its military setting (the show took place in a meeting room at Lockheed's industrial park in Valencia, a temporary exhibition space used by CalArts after the Northridge earthquake damaged the campus). She had also worked with Prieto on a group exhibition the previous year featuring paintings by both painters and artists who worked in other media. At the time, this exhibition was an atypical project at CalArts, which tended to ignore painting. In fact, since the 1960s the Los Angeles art scene had been dominated by sculpture, installation, and—to a lesser degree—film, video, and photography. The revival of painting that occurred on the East Coast and in Europe during the early 1980s did not take place as significantly in Los Angeles, and many West Coast artists and critics viewed painting with suspicion.

It is worth mentioning that during her first year at CalArts, Owens showed installation work for her gallery presentations even though she was actively producing paintings as well. In retrospect Owens has observed that the initial excitement and momentum that came from exhibiting the installations was short-lived; for her they began to feel overdetermined. She then decided to limit herself to painting, attempting to accomplish with that medium what she had tried to do with installation. She began incorporating a similar variety of forms, textures, and references into her paintings, while maintaining a concern for the three-dimensional space of the gallery.

In 1997 Owens collaborated with friends Sharon Lockhart and Frances Stark on an exhibition at Blum & Poe in Santa Monica that consisted of one four-foot by four-foot work by each, as well as an

"The Eagle Rock Show," installation view
Eagle Rock Community Cultural Center
Los Angeles, 1997

Untitled, 1998
Installation view, Patrick Painter Inc.
Santa Monica, California, 1998

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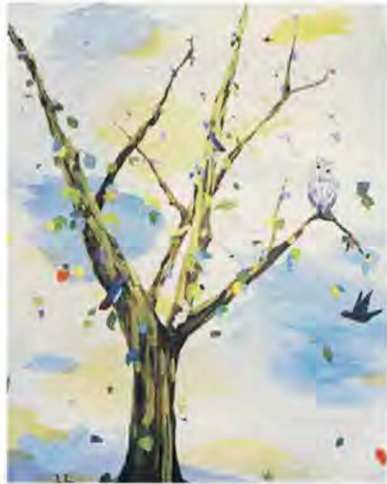

artists' edition box with a handmade slipcover containing a collaborative video, CD, xeroxes, original drawings, and photographs. That same year Owens organized "The Eagle Rock Show" at the Eagle Rock Community Cultural Center with a group of colleagues. In addition to an art exhibition, this community-based event featured live music, film screenings, lectures, prose and poetry readings, and a cakewalk. In 1998, she collaborated with Jorge Pardo on an installation of paintings (by her) and sculptures (by him) at Patrick Painter Inc. and, in 1999, she realized an elaborate installation with Scott Reeder called "Heaven and Hell" at China Art Objects Galleries. Using the idea of "hell," Owens and Reeder transformed the gallery's red basement into a sinful mise-en-scène, complete with a poker table used to play games during the opening (and occasionally throughout the show's run). On the main level of the gallery, Owens and Reeder installed a painting depicting a "tree of life" with birds and falling leaves. Another collaboration, this time with Edgar Bryan in 2001, saw the two artists create self-portraits depicting themselves on the telephone. Although each artist was responsible for initiating his or her own self-portrait, Owens and Bryan engaged in a back-and-forth collaboration on both paintings. The installation reinforced the conceptual underpinnings by positioning the two works on opposite walls so that both the figures and the paintings themselves were in dialogue.

Her most recent cooperative venture was "Cavepainting: Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, and Laura Owens," an exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2002. This exhibition included work by two friends from London, as well as Owens's own paintings. They approached the museum with the desire to create a non-curated, artist-driven exhibition. Owens's proclivity for group activity calls to mind artistic

Laura Owens and Scott Reeder
Detail from "Heaven and Hell"
China Art Objects Galleries
Los Angeles, 1999

Laura Owens and Scott Reeder
"Heaven and Hell," installation view
China Art Objects Galleries
Los Angeles, 1999

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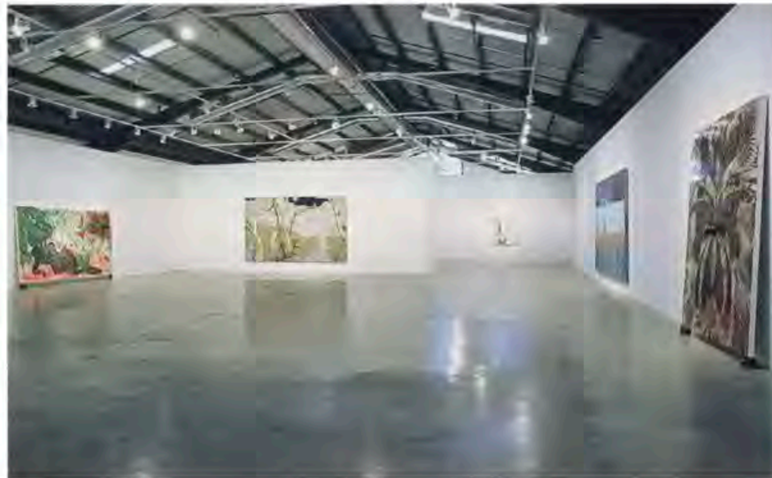

and literary collectives such as the Pre-Raphaelites or the Bloomsbury group, who assembled around a set of common ideals as well as social relationships, and her collaborations position the "I" of painting within a collective "we."

By approaching painting in a pluralistic way, Owens has, without a trace of irony, addressed the medium's most basic conditions: its solitude, its singularity, and its subject. Unlike theater, dance, film, and performance—and more than sculpture, video, and installation—painting is widely perceived as one of the purest expressions of the ego, largely because it is not reliant on a collaborative structure to exist. For Owens, collaboration, as manifested in her work with other artists and her borrowings from the history of art, is at the root of a very different practice—one that involves uncertainty and the freedom that comes with letting go of the "I." She has devised this practice to remain grounded in the present moment, to resist building upon her own history by anticipating what direction her work should take. Unlike many artists who have rummaged through the history of art for ideas to inform and develop their practice, Owens does not sublimate her sources' original identities. Instead she leaves the identities of the plethora of references in any given work firmly intact.

Collective enterprise and historical referencing have long been significant aspects of feminist art practice, but Owens does not align herself directly with that tradition. Nevertheless, it is a tradition that informs the conditions of her practice. In the late 1980s and early 90s, while still an undergraduate at the Rhode Island School of Design, Owens was attempting ambitiously scaled abstractions at a

"Cavepainting: Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, and Laura Owens," installation view
Santa Monica Museum of Art
Santa Monica, California, 2002

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.

time when her professors felt that the domain of abstraction should be reserved for male students. As a young woman painter, she was encouraged to focus on portraiture and still life. She was also urged, unsuccessfully, toward the textile department, as this medium was thought to be a more appropriate venue for her interests. Despite this formative assault, she continued to paint abstractly and insists that the resistance she encountered had very little impact on her.

Although Owens does not position her work in a feminist context, she does see herself as a painter who, because of the gains made by a previous generation of feminist artists, enjoys the freedom to make the kind of work that she chooses. This generation created opportunities that would not have otherwise existed for women artists. Moreover, Owens's artistic practice is informed by the conceptual strategies of second-generation feminist artists including Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger. While Holzer and Kruger adopted some of the early feminist movement's political strategies in the service of broader social critique, Sherman and Levine answered the earlier generation's call for a revisionist art history with the wholesale deconstruction of the image. The academic method adopted by Sherman and Levine focused largely on the works of canonical masters, but Owens's approach to art history is highly intuitive and her revisions, if any, involve drawing in periods and practices that have been previously overlooked.

Finally, to comprehend Owens's highly personal, idiosyncratic painterly language, as well as her choice of scale, it is helpful to consider another, less obvious precursor: Yayoi Kusama. By 1959, Kusama, who had recently moved from Tokyo to New York City, was painting what are arguably the

Embroidered curtain, first quarter
of eighteenth century (detail)
Linen embroidered with crewel wool
Flower approximately 8 inches high
Collection of The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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most important works in her oeuvre. Drawing upon her signature technique—creating a veil-like surface of knitted elements that appear both abstract and representational—she produced a body of very large paintings. For Kusama, addressing the heroicism associated with the monumental scale used by New York School artists such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman was unprecedented. More so than the work of female Abstract Expressionists Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell or Color Field painter Helen Frankenthaler, Kusama's knit-and-purl paintings embodied a proto-feminist strategy. They enlarged "women's work" to a monumental scale while simultaneously parodying the grandeur of Color Field painting. Yet even if her intentions involved deconstructing the ambitions of postwar abstraction, she nonetheless realized those ambitions. Similarly, the naïve quality of Owens's cartoon-like doodles belies the heroicism associated with the scale in which she has chosen to work, as well as the sheer ambition of taking on the entire range of genres.

In approaching her own practice collaboratively and conceptually, Owens undermines the entrenched paradigm of painting as a solitary and heroic pursuit. The modesty evident in her choice of source material stands in contrast to the physical scale of the works and the ambitious scope of her art-historical references. Although she borrows a range of techniques and iconography, she does so without adopting the rhetoric associated with them. She paints on a slippery slope between abstraction and representation, conceptualism and process, folk art and classical tradition. Between these polarities, Owens has found a language that questions the nature of painting while embracing its multifarious manifestations.

Yayoi Kusama
No. White A.Z., 1958–59 (detail)
Oil on canvas
91½ × 142½ inches
Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art

1. Owens leaves her works untitled to encourage the viewer to address each on its own terms rather than through the mediation of a text.
2. Russell Ferguson, "Laura Owens Paints a Picture," *Parkett*, no. 65 (2002): 58.
3. Dr. Albert C. Barnes organized his collection based on the works' formal qualities rather than established hierarchies. By placing objects of diverse origin on the same level—often literally side by side on the same wall—he encouraged viewers to look at their formal relationships.
4. Jennifer R. Gross, "From Cliché to Archetype," in *Laura Owens* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; and Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2001), 27.
5. Ibid., 36.

Schimmel, Paul. "Plays Well With Others." In *Laura Owens*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 29–39.

ARTFORUM

A THOUSAND WORDS Laura Owens TALKS ABOUT HER NEW WORK

Laura Owens makes wily, sensational paintings: Lines sweep into our peripheral vision, speed along as daringly as fearless schoolgirls sliding on ice, then burst unexpectedly into shapes—tiny spiraling volcanoes of color, wavering horizons, or bulky clouds. If Owens's style—a surprising blend of mid-century formalism and Pop mischieviousness—evinces a cagey knowingness, it also reveals an unabashed delight in the voluptuousness of paint and form. With their light touch and winking palette (Rainbow Brites, avocado, harvest gold)—not to mention Owens's open, nonpolemical disposition—her paintings owe more to the seemingly nonchalant inventiveness of Mary Heilmann than to the cool metastyles of Jonathan Lasker or David Reed. One of a number of LA artists (including Monique Prieto, Steven Hull, Ingrid Calame, and Heidi Kidon) currently being touted as the latest rebirth of contemporary painting, Owens came to the West Coast in the early '90s to earn her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts. Born in Euclid, Ohio, in 1970, Owens studied at the Rhode Island School of Design before moving west. We met in her Los Angeles studio, a pair of adjoining storefronts—bright, high-ceilinged spaces that give her work room to breathe—and discussed the enormous (nearly 10-by-40-foot) untitled painting she exhibited last year at Loyola University of Chicago.

—SUSAN MORGAN

I like to think of each painting in an exhibition as posing its own question; and of course any one question may actually negate another. A painting can offer up any number of options for meaning. Looking at a group of five canvases, people will often gravitate to one or two of them. Comparing and contrasting the works raises the issue of quality: Which one is the best? That idea of quality, the success of a particular painting, has a way of falling apart. When the same work is placed in a different context, it may appear to fail; but while something is falling apart, something else is succeeding. I'm always questioning, and that motivates me—this idea of trying to start over every time. That's what keeps painting interesting (and maybe a little bit scary) for me.

I had been thinking a lot about how you, your body, walks past and between paintings. When I made this work for the show at Loyola, it was really an all-or-nothing situation. When I first visited the site, I thought that this was an opportunity to do something different. There was an eighty-foot wall opposite a wall of windows, and I wanted to connect the painting to the view of Lake Michigan. The actual horizon lines up with a line in the painting. It was important to me to use a single piece of canvas, not just panels. There was a twelve-day time limit to complete the project, and even though I had an idea about how to build the structure, it ended up taking four days longer than we'd anticipated.

The canvas is forty feet long and almost nine and a half feet high; when it was stretched, the whole thing was so heavy that it took ten people to lift it. My idea had been to lay down the canvas, do some washes, set the canvas back up again to paint, and then repeat the process. I only had two or three chances to do that, since moving the painting required getting ten people together at the same time. So I found that I had to completely change the way I made the painting. It wasn't under my control. In some ways, that is exactly what I wanted to have happen: Other people, time, and circumstance influenced the way the painting was made.

I've been making big paintings since I was in high school. As a kid growing up in Ohio, I went to the Toledo art museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art, where I saw the big paintings—Frankenthaler, Olitski, Poons, Morris Louis, and Rothko. I remember seeing my first Richard Estes paintings there. I'm a big fan of his work.

I feel that my paintings are very specifically American and have a lot to do with where I come from. I suppose it's a straightforward, Midwestern, no-bones-about-it sensibility and a certain sense of humor. I've always thought that, instead of making the day fit into your painting, you should make the painting fit into your day. A painting should fit into your life. I think that I picked up that idea from Mary Heilmann and her way of working. I met her when she was a visiting artist at Cal Arts, and she had a profound impact on me. Although she's extremely serious about what she's doing, she has a very casual approach to making a painting.

Ultimately, you really want to make the painting that you want to be with. Not one that is constantly telling you everything it knows. Who wants to be with something, or someone, like that? It's more fun to be with someone who is willing to go out on a limb, embarrass themselves a bit. I think that a lot of artists use a painting to point out a reference—a quote, an anecdote, or an idea—and that reference becomes more interesting than the work. I'd much rather have a reference generate a painting.

One of the things that's good about painting is that it has an inner language. When I first stretched the forty-foot canvas, it looked huge. But when the painting was completed—the way that the image was composed—everything appeared to snap down to postcard size. I really liked seeing it from the side, the way that looking at such foreshortened perspective deceives your sense of scale. But when you are up close to it and you walk the walk, go the entire length, you realize it is a very big painting. I think that to make something that is actually big, to literalize it in that way, gives you a lot of options for meaning. I'm always interested in what a painting can do—and then questioning those things. □

Owens, Laura, and Susan Morgan. "A Thousand Words: Laura Owens Talks About Her New Work."
Artforum 37, no. 10, Summer 1999, p. 130-31.

ARTFORUM

LAURA OWENS
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE

By now, we've come to expect stylistic eclecticism from Laura Owens. In one of her new paintings (all works untitled, 1998), whimsically plump bumblebees buzz around a colorful hive; another features a closely toned autumn landscape with an enameled sliver of blue brook and part of a tree limb poking into the picture. A couple of paintings resemble nothing so much as giant doodles—a curvilinear design, drawn with a silver pen and partially filled in with thin washes of murky magenta, covers the entire surface of one canvas; in another, loops of paint squeezed into wobbly circular shapes sit on the surface like thin coiled ropes of colored yarn. But then, a big abstract painting with mounds of ice-cream colors heaped on a sky-blue ground and sprinkled with chunks and flicks of paint is like nothing you've ever seen.

One of the most pronounced tendencies in painting in the late '90s is an attraction to entropic sites—in Owens's work, the exhaustion in question turns around the ever-moribund opposition between abstraction and representation. Precedents from the previous decade come readily to mind—Peter Halley's geometric "cells" and "conduits," Ashley Bickerton's "wall" paintings, Philip Taaffe's Newmanesque "zips." By comparison, however, Owens's work, while it plays fast and loose with the mixing of abstract and representational modes, never so much as hints at a dialectic: There's no urge to rise from the ashes, to get somewhere else, to restore heroic achievement to painting, to prove a point. Instead, her canvases seem laid-back and whimsical. The "country-cute" beehive painting is rendered in a palette of brown, rust, orange, and gold that unmistakably suggests '70s decor. The open, inviting landscape—are the floating monochromatic shapes rocks in a field, clouds in the sky, islands in the sea?—is lightheartedly reminiscent of retro, printed upholstery fabric. Much to her credit, Owens pulls off "casual" without resorting to big statements about being low-key. She makes painting look easy—too easy, perhaps, in the doodle pieces. But when she's on her mark, the smooth, feel-good premise of her work is realized with extreme confidence, and we then see just how good a painter she is.

Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 72"

In the barely there, palomino-hued, autumn landscape, Owens's relaxed sensibility translates as all the space and time in the world. A bright falling-leaf motif—a few red and gold leaves on the tree limb, others floating in the brook that winds languidly into deep space—is the only disruption in the light, scenic vista. The pleasurable infinity it suggests is as much a result of what she paints as how she paints it. Similarly, in her most ambitious "abstract" painting—the one with scoops of "tasteful" colors in pale blue, coffee, lime, and white—the carefree, even subtly euphoric play with paint seduces. The effervescing mounds are animated by an orbital field of painterly marks that spin off into blue space, nuggets of paint that seem to crash in fissures where edges don't meet, and rainbow-variegated smears and squiggles that ricochet around the painting, sometimes spiraling into deep space, at other times slapping up against the picture plane. Nothing breaks the lyrical buoyancy and, by extension, the sense of well-being Owens describes. What's equally impressive is her ability to render the space of painting so free and clear of its own historical baggage. In short, there's little to buy into except the pleasure of painting, and paint wielded by someone who really knows what they're doing—that's always a thing of beauty to behold.

—Jan Avgikos

Avgikos, Jan. "Laura Owens: Gavin Brown's enterprise." *Artforum* 37, no. 5, January 1999, p. 119.

Artists Space New York
Jan/March 1997

Andrea Bowers

Hot Coffee

Selected by Thomas Lawson

It seems that almost everyone who moves to Los Angeles develops increasingly complex and out of control allergies; an aggravated sensibility, a feeling of being constantly undetermined by unknown forces, becomes the ruling condition of everyday life. Sunny optimism is darkened by the squally clouds of paranoia.

Dave Muller, *Visit Los Angeles: Six Abstract Details from the Microgeneration Immediately Preceding My Own*, 1996.

Edward Weston's photograph of a crudely-made sign for a coffee shop stuck out in the California desert resonates with this disquiet and pathos—I almost sneeze just looking it. A giant cup and saucer loom large in the foreground, yet are oddly lost in the vast landscape that rolls out to a distant mountain range. The sign is not very well made. Its edges are bashed and bruised by the wind, the lettering is not quite convincing. Its placement out in the inhospitable desert offers hope to the coffee-drinking traveler, despair to the coffee maker imprisoned under the open sky. Looking at this now, I still feel overwhelmed by the struggling, hopeless optimism it captures. The picture so eloquently expresses a weirdly hypnotic combination of confidence and delusion: setting down roots as convincingly as the tumbleweed.

The transient nature of Los Angeles has become something remarked too often; yet it is hard to deny the flux of the place. People come and go. They come with fantasies and hopes, and find traffic management and gridlock. They rarely find a destination, only a rest stop, a coffee break. From the U.S. they come looking for the glamour of the entertainment industries, but from around the Pacific, and from Mexico and Central America, they come looking for jobs and security. As a result, cultures shift, merge, and split apart again, as does the ground beneath our feet. The persistent ambiance is one of distrustful spectatorship, the anomie of post-suburban life.

The one allergy I brought with me from New York is that activated by curatorial attempts to make thematic statements out of modest group shows. My organizing principle for any exhibition has always been driven by the simple desire to see artworks I like — that I find interesting, challenging, amusing — gathered together. The pleasure of a show like this is found in the discoveries made possible by the actual grouping of works.

Having said that, I will go on to claim that the art selected here does share something more than the fact that it was recently made in Los Angeles. Mostly this is manifest in the hybrid sense of unease that animates the work, a kind of provisional, improvisational refusal to find closure, to make the big, destiny-defying statement. There is no particular allegiance to medium or category, but an openness to association, an interest in mixing material and information from familiar sources in mass culture, esoteric themes from academe, and insider references to contemporary art. There is an attempt to find a beauty, or at least the pathos of an ordering, in the clutter of rescued banality. In that attempt a whole range of interesting questions about aesthetics, spectatorship, class alienation and humor are thrown together to form a puzzle which can only be partially solved by recourse to the idea of "art from Los Angeles."

—Thomas Lawson

Thomas Lawson is an artist and the Dean of the School of Art at the California Institute of the Arts. He exhibited at Artists Space in 1977, and curated the show "Scottish Artists" at the gallery in 1979. From 1979 to 1991, Artists Space acted as the conduit for Real Life, a publication he co-founded with Susan Morgan.

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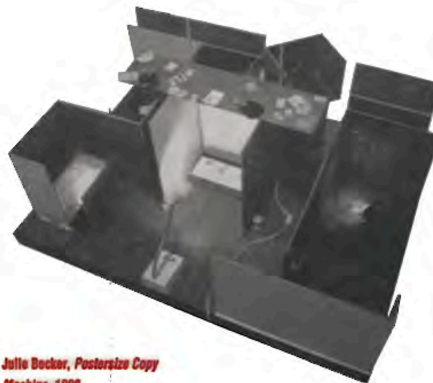
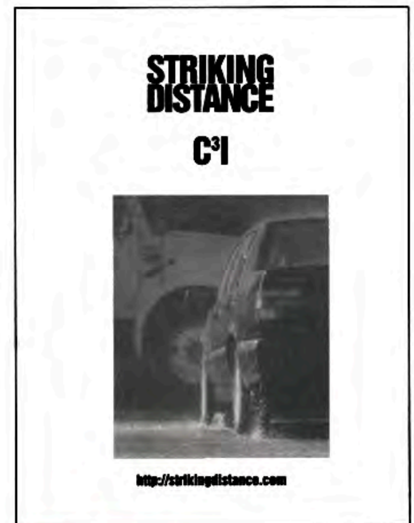
Laura Owens



Julie Becker, *Posterize Copy Machine*, 1996.



Kent Young, *Untitled*, 1996

Lawson, Thomas. "Hot Coffee." *Artists Space New York Bulletin,* January/March 1997.

ARTFORUM

OPENINGS

LAURA OWENS

BENJAMIN WEISSMAN

From Frank Stella's fat and fucked-up *objets de hood* to the highly caffeinated überabstractions of artists like David Reed, Fiona Rae, and Fabian Marcaccio, ultraneurotic painting continues to make the global rounds. In a quest for true emptiness, every conceivable nonrepresentational utterance—whether the hand of the artist is manifestly present or totally absent (well, how *did* those brush strokes get there, Doctor?)—has been well rehearsed, walked through, and played out. Sure, the fate of contemporary painting is sublime/tragic: painting as painting, or painting as "painting" (the canvas as Philosophy 101), has been the meat and potatoes of paint culture ever since Barnett Newman brought the medium to its knees. Simply setting out to paint a great picture, is what? too easy? impossible? old hat? romantic?

Articulating reality was once a decent enough pursuit. It still is, depending on how far you take your idea of what reality is and what it is to represent it. For some folks, just getting up out of the studio chair is a scary prospect. That's where Laura Owens comes in: she's no stranger to late-century artistic torpor, but somehow she manages to rise, brush in hand, and paint.

Owens is the most unusual and interesting new painter to come out of Los Angeles (an epicenter for rad painting) in a good while. Her paintings are loaded with ambiguities: their blankness, paltry markings, quivering lines, and muted Miami colors exude large doses of vulnerability. They're also brick shithouse tough. And gigantic, too. Why? The better to be real with you, my dear—or to intimidate your ass. Like some hybrid of the protagonists of *Clueless* and "Little Red Riding Hood," our female lead is as knowing and diabolical as a card shark yet intensely innocent, an FBI informant going undercover to find out what happens with the Wolf before he tries to eat her.

Okay, so Owens is not the only one who wants a date with Mr. Newman, or for him to think she's okay or even sort of likes her. Like a lot of others, she's got a coffin rattling in her head; she paints and waits for a thumbs-up from the sweet Jewish guy who invented the Zip. While the surface of a Laura Owens painting bears little resemblance to

Weissman, Benjamin. "Openings: Laura Owens." *Artforum* 34, no. 3, November 1995, pp. 84–85.

Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1994,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 96" x 10' This page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1995,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 10' x 96"

the titan's colored fields, she does share his reverence for the medium. Owens is on the trail of a nonpsychological, votive moment, where areas of color exist for their own sake and chunks of a painting allude to their unfinished status, pleading with the eyeball to conjure what could be there, if anything. She works with voids as if they were solids, and though painted riffs almost jell into cartoony sequences—a thick line connects to a mushy smear that touches a benign lump, all within an airy, heady space—her inventions remain resolutely nonrepresentational. For her, painting is painting, not a story.

Yet Owens' formal stabs tilt toward the perverse: she tinkers with the whole Edge Thing—the sides and corners of her canvases are scalloped like scary psychedelic doilies. A layer-cakey mound of speckly color resides on the sidelines like a car wreck, or a stark geometric area of color is blasted apart by an imposing candy cane. She definitely has a sense of humor: in one mammoth picture, amid a swirly mass a figure tinier than a breath mint sticks its tongue out. In another, a micro man gives you the finger. But what seems to be an infantilization of the world of painting turns out to be a series of brain-blowing perceptual plays, surrealist canvases after bigger game. Owens festoons her works with remarkable ornamentation: glops of white on a powder blue field are fussed over with a fingernail-painting party of itty-bitty dips and dabs. In Owens' paintings meticulousness borders on madness; idiotic optimism hooks up with a bone-chilling futility; a prayer for the phenomenal purity of painting is answered with the sobering knowledge of its limits. Like enormous pages from a deranged coloring book, they are at once froufrou (all pastel and sweet 16) and ballsy—Color Field utopia as dystopian disaster.

Owens' gentle, waifish, never-mind-me gestures give the impression of liberation or freedom even as she's conscious of the dead end. Though she's aware that the more her paintings reveal, the more they're fucked, they're knowing enough to suggest that she realizes they're booby traps that could go off at the slightest touch. But instead of wallowing in second thoughts, Owens dives right after the jugular; she outpsychotics her contemporaries, and without even batting a false eyelash. Both intensely

ambitious and spazzed-out, her canvases are big and goofy, but cerebrally, even serenely so. We've seen dorky fall-on-your-face painting, but never the ante-upping, no-holds-barred awkwardness Owens righteously constructs.

Paintings may not have much in common with novels, but both can drive their makers crazy. Gerhard Richter's comment that "deep down painting is complete idiocy" is strikingly similar to novelist Thomas Bernhard's conviction that "ultimately everything one writes turns out to be nonsense." Both art forms are there for the taking, but in each case the void you look into is daunting. Full of smarts, Owens happily falls in and kicks up some brilliant pictures. Maybe it's because she knows that those who believe they're going to push either to some great unknown land or undo the myth of the medium (with their bare hands, goddammit!) are full of shit. In Owens' painting the earnest and the absurd cut a swath through the painting tangle. Leaving both critique crap and New York school navel-gazing to her woeful peers, she cunningly reinvents her practice, charging it with an ambiguous power.

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Weissman, Benjamin. "Openings: Laura Owens." *Artforum* 34, no. 3, November 1995, pp. 84–85.