

TEXAS HOLD 'EM

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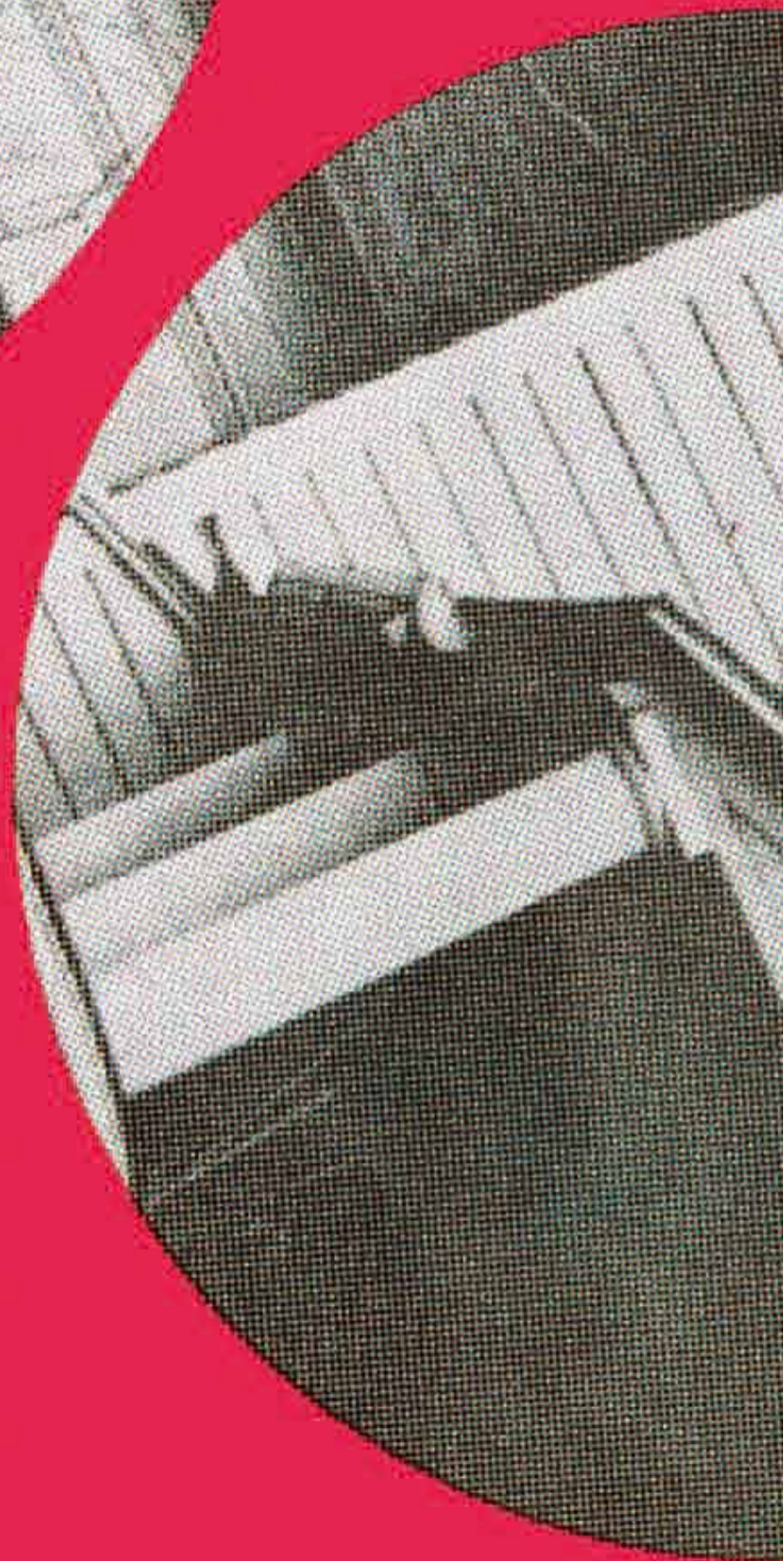
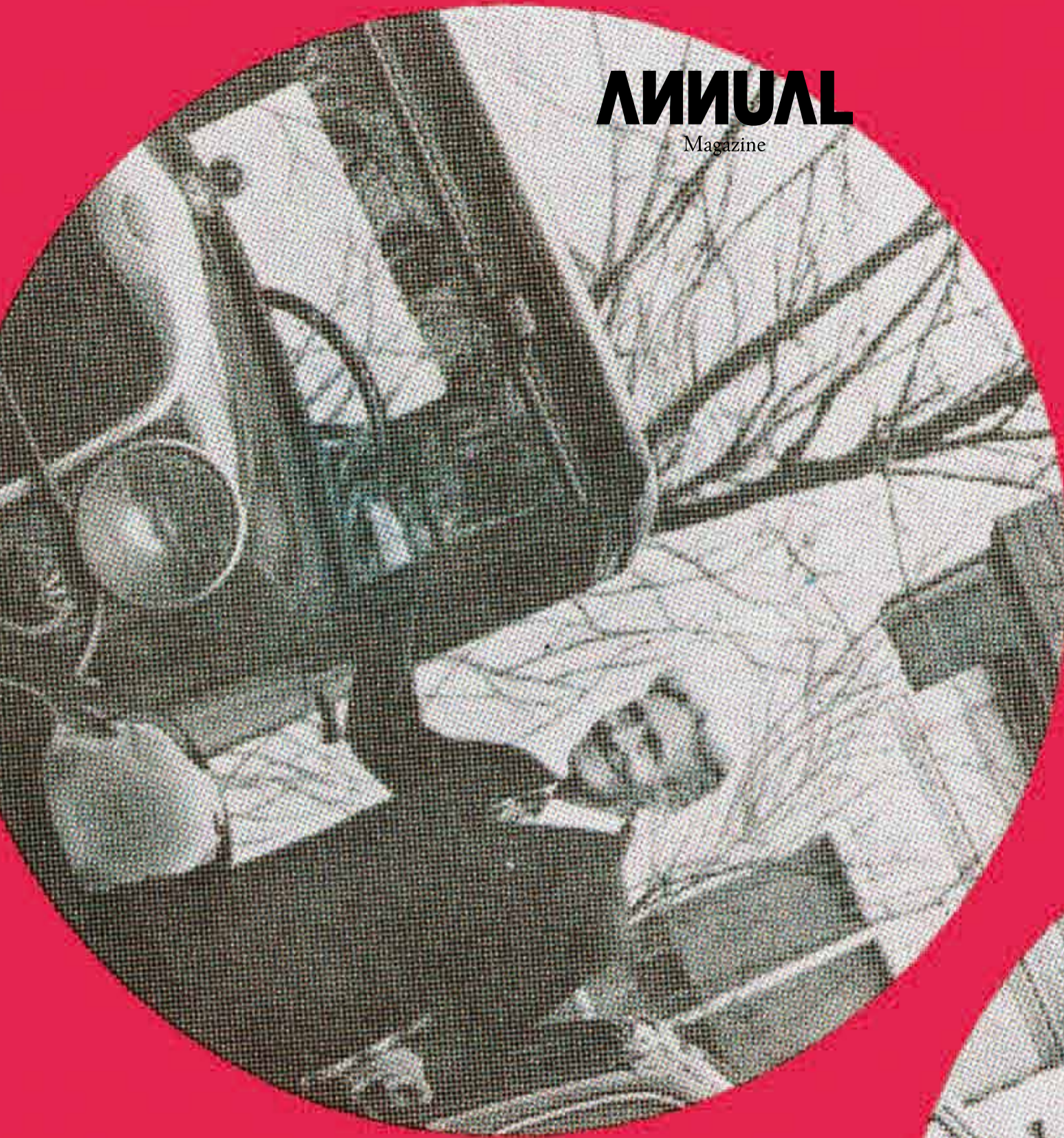
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ABOVE ABOVE THE MOON

ABOVE THE MOON

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Tom Burr,
PLAYBOY,
SEPTEMBER, 1975,
2012



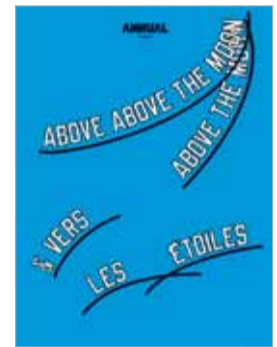
Annette Kelm,
UNTITLED, 2010



Sarah Morris,
TOTAL LUNAR
ECLIPSE [RIO], 2012



Kelley Walker,
33 YEARS LATER,
HE GOT THE BUG.,
2012



Lawrence Weiner,
TO THE MOON, 2012

THIS ISSUE FEATURES A SERIES OF 5
ASSORTED COVERS CREATED EXCLUSIVELY
FOR ANNUAL MAGAZINE
BY 5 INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS

Laura Owens

IN CONVERSATION
WITH FABIAN STECH



Fabian Stech: Can you tell me about your new project in Los Angeles?

Laura Owens: I've had the intention to do a show in LA for a long time. I wanted to find a place where I could use the space to make the work and then have an exhibition. For me, to have a space that is both a studio and an exhibition space is to make a new type of space. The project is also inspired by the history of artists working in Los Angeles and making site-specific projects, like for example Jason Rhoades and Mike Kelley. In the past my work has been influenced by the space in which it was shown. I've looked around for a year or more, thinking about architecture that was unique and that had specific connotations. I looked at an old church and an abandoned movie theater, places like that. And then actually I turned away from this idea and decided to find a space where I could do a more straightforward painting exhibition.

Fabian Stech: It's strange that you also wanted to work in the space. Do you think it affects not only the hanging but also how you're working?

Laura Owens: I'm hoping that the fact that I did work in here affects the exhibition. I think it just feels like a more natural way to work, and to view work. It might be interesting to see what happens to a space you've been using for a year. It's not just about being influenced by the space, but also trying to develop an option that moves away from the system of gallery and institutional exhibitions. It's more on my terms, of how long it will be up, when it will open. At this point I

don't know how it will be named, or described as a project or exhibition. In a way, I'm just trusting the process. It's interesting to allow the process to have a life of its own, and also to have connections with people and their ideas. Some of the people who work for me, like Calvin, happen to be skilled screen printers. We've been working together and his presence introduced me to silk-screen printing and allowed me to let it enter into my work. So, allowing for influence and unknown possibilities sets the tone of the working process. That's only one example. I like the idea of not knowing. It has a scary element but it's also very free and it excites me.

Fabian Stech: You said it's a more neutral space here. It's an industrial space. Did this fact influence you regarding the dimensions or other parameters of your painting?

Laura Owens: I have no idea. The scale of this place was perhaps inspiring to me. The idea that there would be a much larger scale to work at was interesting. I've been doing many shows where the ideas manifested between the paintings and in the accumulation of the paintings. Here, it's really my intention to point the viewer inside each painting. I've been holding myself to that in a way I think I haven't done before. For example, the clock painting you saw in Basel. It's comprised of 94 paintings, but it's one piece! And before that, in 2011, there were these nine works that are each 213 × 243 cm, but they're all one piece. They're intended to wrap whatever space they are in on either one, two, three or four walls in a room.

In the 90s, I started out making large paintings, but also talking about

the spaces between the paintings. For example, I did this exhibition in 1998 where I had 3 shows open at the same time in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The Chicago painting was in a University Gallery that was perpendicular to a 30 m long window front which looked onto Lake Michigan. The gallery was about 25 m long and I made a 13 m long painting. I took the horizon line of Lake Michigan and included it into the painting, it was made *in situ*, in the gallery space.

Fabian Stech: You said you will not focus on what's happening in between the paintings, but you will focus on what's inside the pictures. Do you consider them as a window or as an opening to another space?

Laura Owens: No. When the combination of the paintings and the site generates meaning, that takes the pressure off the individual painting. So individual paintings do not have to rise to the occasion. The paintings do not have an individual *gestalt* affect, as a finished historical and autonomous object would. I've been working in that way for a while. One example is the clock paintings.

Because the piece is located in the choices between the paintings, it allows for an undetermined growth of the size of the work. As many ways as I organize and present them, it will always flesh out new meanings and associations. It's an alternative to the idea of the whole. To the *gestalt*. Now picking this space, I feel that I want to put the pressure back on each individual painting and at the same time have it speak clearly as one thing in the exhibition. Can I do both? That's



what I'm trying to do.

In the painting you saw in the other studio, which is for the London exhibition, I'm trying to work with similar ideas. All the paintings are going to be hung together in one exhibition, but they aren't one piece. In order to emphasize this idea, there are words that will read through seven paintings: "pavement karaoke", which is an event that I'm creating here in Los Angeles. So one idea generates the other and there will be a relation between the two places, it's an underpainting about an underground event in Los Angeles... It's covered and not seen, like the event that will not be seen or experienced in London.

Fabian Stech: You once said that you want to be with your painted pictures. What did you mean? I understood that a painting is, in a way, like a person.

Laura Owens: I think it's a quality that I attribute to what a painting can do and what a painting should do. It's complicated, but I feel that painting has to penetrate the viewer and should not allow the viewer to penetrate it. That's important to me, and perhaps I'm assigning an anthropomorphic quality to the painting, if I'm saying it's like a person; however, it can't be a passive object which you look into,

like a window. It's completely uninteresting to me. I think you could possibly use the idea "window" in paintings because it's a historical idea that you can play around with, but it's not interesting to me for paintings to be windows into a passive other world. There are other things that are important as well, like the discourse around the painting, painting as an ethic, or the way the painting is making space. But the painting has to activate the space it's in, and not let itself passively fall back into the wall. It has to motivate and act on the viewer who is in the space.

Fabian Stech: Is there also a relation to the fact that all of your pictures are untitled? Is this also a way of letting the painting work directly on the viewer?

Laura Owens: None of my work is titled. The books are titled, but none of the paintings have titles. Early on, I found it better to not let the viewer off the hook because I was playing around with ideas of abstraction and recognizable imagery. It was too easy for language to allow a determined narrative to take place. What happened also is that I was quickly horrified by a title I thought of. The titles never added anything to the paintings or any experience I had with the paintings.

That said, I'm a fan of people who title their work. One of my favorite shows was the Jorge Pardo show he did in 1995 here in Los Angeles, in Tom Salomon's Garage. The works were all lamps and the sheet you got with the titles was almost like a list, a narrative you write down, almost like a poem, not really alluding to the lamps. I like the idea of the titles being an object, how they were almost like a piece in the show. Titles locate the work and are very specific. I'm really into this when used as an object, disjuncture or distancing mechanism with the work, but I don't have this relationship to titles in my own work.

Fabian Stech: That's also perhaps linked to the fact that you don't call painting a language, but an inner language?

Laura Owens: Really no! I think if you refer to painting having an inner language, it sounds like everyone knows what it is, a communicated thing, and that's misleading to people and keeps them out of a painting. And they go, 'Oh, I don't know enough about painting so I can't look at it. I don't know what to say about it.' So I shy away from saying painting has its own inner language! If you and I decided that painting has an inner language and we named that, it would be really

alienating. It means there is a language that someone who is outside the discourse or in another context wouldn't have access to, because if it's a language it implies the determination of the "words" used, and it says we all agree. I don't believe there is any agreement whatsoever. There are things that painting does and we can talk about it! I understand what you mean by saying painting has an inner language but I don't want to go there because it continues a sort of paradigm that easily allows people who think of themselves as conceptual artists to say, 'Oh, painting, I just don't know it well enough in order to even talk about it because it's got its own history and language that I don't understand.' And I think that's bullshit!

Fabian Stech: Because painting in a way is evident, anytime.

Laura Owens: Yeah, that's what I want to say. I don't think you need much prior information. It's interesting to know the background of the work, but usually not necessary.

Fabian Stech: Why are you so attracted to books?

Laura Owens: I had a sort of epiphany in the library with an old book 4 or 5 years ago. I took it off the shelf and I was looking at it. It was the quality of the paper and the experience I was having. It was similar to what I experience when I look at a painting. The same thing happened to me maybe 14 years ago with textiles. I was in the Art Institute in Chicago and I went down to the textile section and I had an epiphany that these were paintings, that this is part of the canon for me. I could choose to add it to painting's history, and have it be the same as painting, which then is stretching painting's possibilities. So it is with a book, it's this object that gets made and creates a type of looking and absorption that I felt is similar enough. And I also was done with framing drawings and hanging them on the wall. I liked the idea of touching and holding the paper. With the drawings I felt that the kind of inaccessibility of hanging them on the wall was becoming boring to me.

Fabian Stech: Is there irony in your work? I could never see irony in your paintings.

Laura Owens: The word ironic got used in the 90s a lot and that was when I first started showing. New York still felt like the center of painting and there was a strong belief in certain conservative tropes in painting. If anything rose up against this belief, whether it was by using a flat house paint, not being from New York, not using certain colors, alluding to illustration, or something from outside, like historic gesture, you were identified as ironic. At the time, people felt threatened by the dislocation of painting and New York as the center of art, and a lot of people wanted to make sure there was this sincerity in painting. They don't want to feel tricked by conceptual painting, and perhaps this comes after the backlash against Neo-Expressionism. So that word "irony" got put on a number of people making paintings back then. It was ridiculous, because who would invest time and energy into making a painting and it's all a fake painting? And even if you go there, a fake painting is still a painting.

Fabian Stech: Isn't irony the fact of taking one step back from what you're doing?

Laura Owens: That's the literary way to understand it. You are talking about Shakespeare and Hamlet. The play within a play. That's interesting. When it was used casually in art reviews, that's not what they meant. They asked like, 'Is this a real painting? Does she really believe in painting?' They felt threatened by people who want to kill painting and make fun of it. In your definition, Manet is the ultimate ironist.

Fabian Stech: For me, irony refers also to the Socratic principle and to his pedagogical aim of teaching something. The kinetic parts of your clock paintings, for example, are an ironic device to take a step back.

Laura Owens: I think with the clock paintings that there is this idea of collage and the idea of subjectivity in the gesture. Here a gesture is allowed to free itself from the canvas. I mean there is irony, but it's also layered with an idea of punning or word play. A jostling between the parts that asks where the relationships are, and how is meaning being generated, or is there no meaning? A clock-face and a portrait – how do those concepts overlap in our minds? What is happening at the moment of recognition?

Fabian Stech: What do you use as a starting point when you begin to work? Is it an idea, a gesture or something else?

Laura Owens: I had this theory, I don't know if I still have it, that there are two types of artists: those having a hard time starting, and those having a hard time finishing. And I was definitely the one who had a hard time starting. So I generated this process that anything could be a painting: a person walking in my studio and giving me an idea, me taking a snapshot, me taking a hike or going on vacation, all of that could generate a painting, also sketching, just very traditional sketching in a sketchbook. It can come from anywhere. Allowing for

these influences, it generates ridiculous and almost absurd beginnings of paintings. This requires a faith in how you are doing what you are doing, and locates the real choices in making the work.

Fabian Stech: Is this process that everything can be and can generate a painting also responsible for your motifs in the way that you paint what you want to paint?

Laura Owens: It comes from philosophical belief. I don't have the quotes in front of me, but Francis Picabia was speaking of allowing a sort of dispersal, not about this sort of reiteration, of emphatically saying the same things over and over again to cement me as the author. I generally have the faith that I can't get away from myself, as much as I try to go away from myself and try to inhabit some other space like photorealist painting or other things. I honestly think they slide back into being my paintings. I don't think it's even possible for me to go away from me.

Fabian Stech: You're trying not to paint like Laura Owens?

Laura Owens: Yeah, I'm trying! Also to make it interesting for myself. It's like, 'What happens when you do this?' What happens when you change everything that you're doing in the studio instead of holding on to this image. Even the multiplicity of techniques I'm working with comes out of ideas inherent in collage, which is associated with Picabia and a certain historical moment. The idea of collage is that you have the accumulation of these different ways of seeing all converging in one space to make this third type of seeing.

Fabian Stech: Francis Picabia at the end of his career wasn't understood. Isn't that a danger for an artist?

Laura Owens: Are you afraid of not being understood?

Fabian Stech: Sometimes, for example when I'm asking questions in English!

Laura Owens: In the studio that's a real killer! Who do you want to understand you? It can only go lower and lower until there's nothing left. I actually think it's unhealthy in the studio to think, 'Will this be understood?' That's the wrong question. When it's finished, yes, it's like, 'What is this? What did I just make? Is it good or is it bad?' It's an issue of quality. I can, in my own way, look at it and decide that it's not working or that in another one it is. In terms of being in the middle of the process and thinking about whether or not what you're doing would be understood...that would be bad.

Fabian Stech: Is there a question that takes you further when you are working?

Laura Owens: It's thinking about what it means to be finished with a painting. Because I think that's one of the really big questions: what does it actually mean to finish a painting? It's the most interesting part in a painting because it's so strongly felt by the one who's making it and yet so allusive. You know when you went too far, and you know when you didn't.

Fabian Stech: You only decide by yourself when it's finished? Or can you speak with people on this subject, can someone interfere?

Laura Owens: (astonished) Yeah, no one else would ever...no. I have a strong feeling about when something is finished. I absolutely know when I've gone too far. The more painting I've made, the clearer it becomes where that line is.

Fabian Stech: Do you work fast?

Laura Owens: That depends on what you mean by the word "work". I think about ideas for years before they're ever incorporated into a painting. I start by making tests, doing research, thinking about the size. So all of that could be happening in the painting, but you wouldn't see it. It's a long process. If I've gone too far I most likely throw the painting away. But before beginning a painting, I do many studies. It's almost like I teach myself to paint the painting before I paint it. Then I really know where it's going, at least about 70-80% of it, and then there's the final stage, the fun part. I have this thing where I tell myself that I need to make a painting that I can paint on. I don't know what this really means. But there is painting that happens on a painting.

Fabian Stech: What is this research process like?

Laura Owens: In these here in front of you, it's just getting little bits of ideas out to see what they look like. Sometimes it's sketching and I can do a lot of it in Photoshop. I take pictures of the paintings that I'm working on and bring them back in the computer to paint on top. I use a digital projector to project my painting on the canvas so that I can think about it. These here in front of us are not paintings, these are studies. That's me playing around.

Fabian Stech: From your studio here behind the Dodgers Stadium, we can see the Hollywood inscription at the horizon. Is there an influence of Hollywood and the entertainment industry in your work?

Laura Owens: I don't feel it. I had a job as a backdrop painter for

making concert backdrop for bands like Rage Against the Machine and other weird groups out of an industrial park in Southern California when I was in CalArts. It was a summer job and I learned how to project images and draw very large. It was real technical. But otherwise, I don't feel an influence, not really. I am, like everybody, a fan of film, but I don't see how it influences me. I've made paintings that are similar to sequential scenes, here's a picture and then here's the picture thirty seconds later. That's kind of a filmic idea.

Fabian Stech: Who's your favorite director?

Laura Owens: Preston Sturges, he's one of my favorite filmmakers. Robert Altman.

Fabian Stech: You came from the Midwest here to California to study.

Laura Owens: I went to RISD in Rhode Island first, and studied there in a very traditional East Coast formal academic training environment. In the painting department, which I was in, I actually ended up making sculpture. The school taught a good formal foundation. A lot of the teachers there came out of the Bauhaus. It was a rigorous foundation program, but when it came to contemporary art and contemporary painting, they stopped with Willem de Kooning. There might have been a little bit of Julian Schnabel, but Warhol wasn't a painter and Jasper Johns was not an artist. They were not considered. So I decided to go to graduate school right away to something where they were more invested in the ethics of minimalism and conceptualism. I applied to a couple of schools and then decided on CalArts which was perfect. It was the opposite of RISD. It starts with the 70s and goes forward. I left CalArts in 1994.

Fabian Stech: Is there someone who influenced you the most?

Laura Owens: I think everybody influenced me. It was a culture of pluralism. It gave permission to try to make anything you want and be able to defend it and believe in it. You were treated like a peer, not a student. There was no hierarchy, and even an undergrad student was treated the same way. I was a graduate student but everybody was treated very equally. When somebody did something interesting, they said, 'that's interesting,' even if it wasn't interesting to everyone. It was a peer pressure culture, hard but effective. You had to decide what you're interested in and then make it!

Fabian Stech: Are there contemporary painters that influenced you?

Laura Owens: The artists that feel important to me, I don't know if that's influence, are people like Charles Ray, Richard Tuttle, Mary Heilmann. They have an investment in formal concerns that result from extremely specific decisions that are being made. Their work manages to have a direct relationship to emotional and psychological states through abstraction. Yet it's all manifesting out of a specific formal practice.

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UNTITLED, 2009 — acrylic and oil on linen, 205.7 × 292.1 cm •
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

UNTITLED, 2006 — oil and acrylic on linen, 160 × 114.3 cm •
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

UNTITLED, 2011 — oil, acrylic and Flashe on linen, 205.7 × 342.9 cm •
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise