

# GALERIE GISELA CAPITAIN

LAURA OWENS

April 14 – June 25, 2011

"To redeem the monotony of plain surfaces has ever been the aim of all the arts, but especially that of the needle." This quote appears in a hand-made facsimile of a book about Jacobean embroidery made by Laura Owens. The plates reproduced in faint black ink in Owens' facsimile reproduction are largely obscured, however, by wild splotches, cross-hatchings and flashes of paint in many colors. Though ostensibly a book about embroidery, its subject in this remade version seems rather to be the paint which 'embroiders' the flat monochromatic pages, 'redeeming the monotony' of their plain surfaces.

Embroidery has been an area of interest for Laura Owens and subject matter of her paintings for many years. The allegiance this book suggests between the arts of the needle and the paintbrush brings to mind many paintings by Owens from recent years in which lavish embroidered crewel motifs are recreated with vivid brush strokes, or indeed, with ribbons of paint squeezed straight from the tube, whose three dimensionality, raised on the canvas' surface, approximates the raised texture of the original stitching. *Untitled*, 2011, a new diptych of large raw linen canvases, complicates this painting/embroidery analogy further through reversal. Rather than representing embroidery through the medium of paint as earlier paintings did, here paint-strokes are translated into embroidery: brightly colored loops, zig-zags, lines or dots are hand-stitched in bright colors, their forms convincing counterparts to the neighboring sketchy marks or thin patches of paint.

These embroidered motifs elaborate the central figure here – a large open loop – which itself seems ambivalent and out of place as central subject matter of an imposing diptych. The loop: somewhere between handwriting, decorous curlicue and loop of thread, needs only a little adornment to be transformed into a face, a balloon or a speech bubble. It is an open, generous, accommodating motif; emblematic of the energetic mix of ambivalence and accommodation that characterizes Owens' work. A picture book, one of the hand-made books amongst those collected on three wooden tables, takes the loop as its central protagonist. In fact, it was this book that generated the diptych, which itself can be read as two open pages of a book, with the corner of the room as its imagined spine.

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In the neighboring exhibition space, meanwhile, the loop appears again amongst a frieze of small, square paintings, hung high in double rows. But here the loop is adorned with a moving clock hand, rotating 360 degrees around the paintings' surface: a raised line that moves and casts its shadow as it goes. Moving clock hands punctuate several canvases in the three groups of small square paintings installed in this gallery. Are these in fact clocks - that is functional objects - and not paintings at all? And if they are, where are the numbers? There are numbers to be found, but they are rather tumbling randomly across another painting's surface, or used as place holders for eyes on a sketched-out face with no clock-hands at all. Elsewhere, though, a somewhat surprised-looking face has no numbers but rather a pair of clock hands in lieu of a mouth. The face of the clock is literalized, or substituted by a circle of white hand prints, while the clock hands themselves may be painted versions in fat impasto instead of real moving originals. Quick-witted punning spins across the grouped canvases, as the clocks' hands and face are replaced with human face and hands in literal painted versions; the moving clock hands, meanwhile, take collage a step further by adding moving parts to the still composition. While introducing the question of time to painting, not generally considered a time-based medium, they also suggest an impatience and unwillingness to settle or be still that allegorizes the dynamic, irreverent, apparently hasty nature of Owens' imagery.

If the clocks signify speed, then the books have the opposite effect. Again they introduce the element of time into the activity of viewing, but here it is a slowed-down leisurely browse. The 'don't touch' of the painted canvas is elbowed out by the 'please read me' of these exquisite, unique objects. Not only is a temporal reversal at hand, however, but also a functional one. Books and the process of printing are all about reproduction and distribution, but Owens' books are laboriously crafted by hand and are one-offs. While some riff with the creative process (a book of different colored paint samples; or an instruction manual for block printing that has been overrun by the process itself, graffitied with unruly block-printed 'x's), others are homages to artists Owens reveres (in one pair of books, cut-outs in the black and white op-art pages spell out B-R-I-D-G-E-T and R-I-L-E-Y; another trilogy of books sketches out Maurice Denis' photographs of wife and children.) Some books are playful (a restaging of the chess final between Judit Polgar and Kasparov in which the drama unfolds, one move per page), while others touch on the political ('Fruit and Nuts' combines schematic printed imagery of fruit and nuts, signs of California's natural bounty, with clippings from a radical 1960s Berkeley student newspaper.)

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There is no thematic overview to the groups of books as a whole, they are rather repositories for the various influences, interests and creative processes that occupy Owens and filter into her painted work. She calls the books "a repository of all my excess ideas", enjoying the fact that, unlike in the traditionally elevated medium of painting, for a book "the threshold is very low." Despite their simple, at times almost childish nature, however, the books themselves have been carefully composed and crafted. There is nothing sketch-book-like about them (the one book titled 'Sketch Book 2011' is a carefully plotted out collection of sketches arranged in a narrative fashion, a parody of what a sketch book should be, as is signaled by the words on the final page: 'The End'.) A key influence for Owens was Virginia Woolf who set up *The Hogarth Press* publishing house in 1917 with her husband, Leonard. The laborious process of type-setting the books by hand was a revelation for Woolf, who began to appreciate the sentence as an object that could be physically constructed. As Owens says "Making books, hand binding, doing all the slow work and thinking with the other side of my brain about signatures, orientation, gluing and which page is going where etc, but also allowing myself to put 'anything' into a book, is helping me see my paintings differently."

Laura Owens has taken pains in her painting practice to work against a hierarchy of imagery, allowing the most peripheral of details, or elements derogatively considered to be decorative, to hold the main space of the canvas, while using the irreverence this unleashes in combining and testing out methods and techniques of composition and paint application in inventive and unexpected ways. The ongoing practice of making books must be seen as an extension and a generative element of her painterly endeavor. The books are not appendages to the main body of the paintings, but are rather fertile beds of ideas that have become an essential element of Owens' dynamic, circular practice: feeding the paintings with ideas and imagery as much as the paintings feed into them.

Kirsty Bell, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011