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

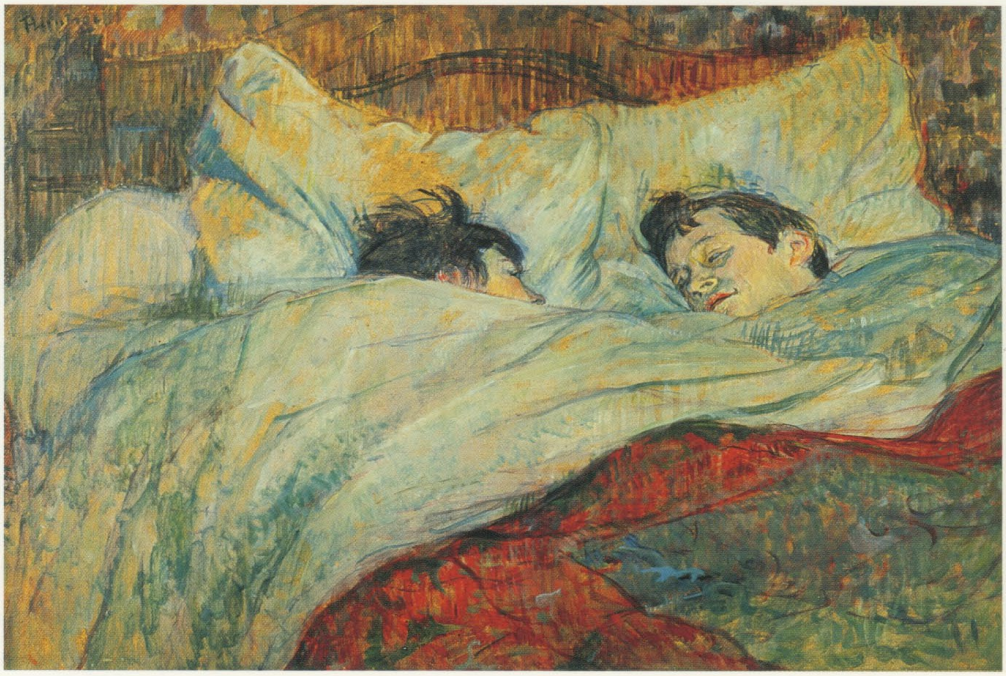
disreputed late twentieth-century art movements, these references have all but disappeared in her work over the past four years.

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

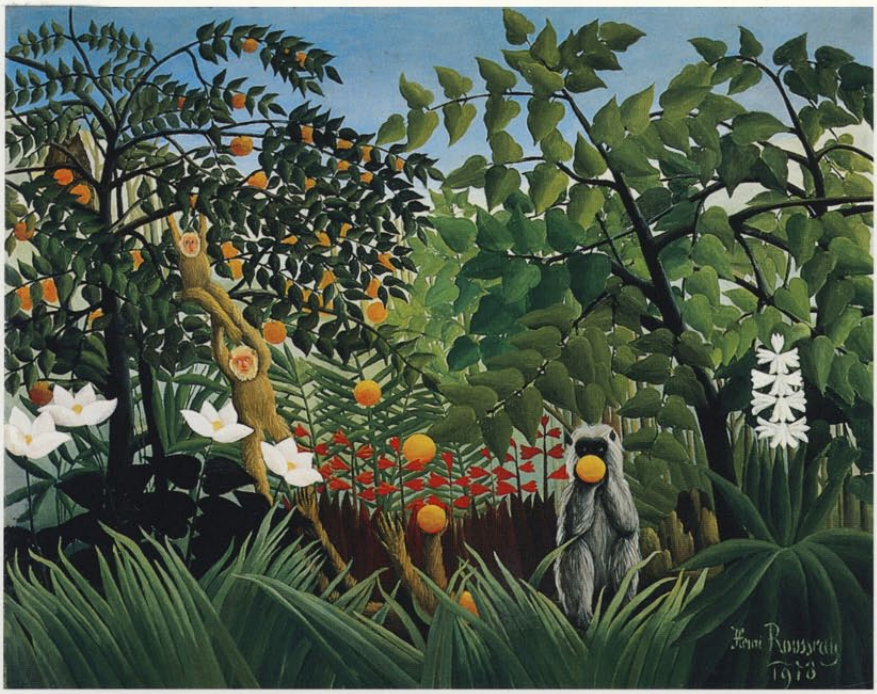
Untitled, 2001 (detail)



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 1/4 × 27 3/4 inches
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Antonin Personnaz bequest, 1937



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]

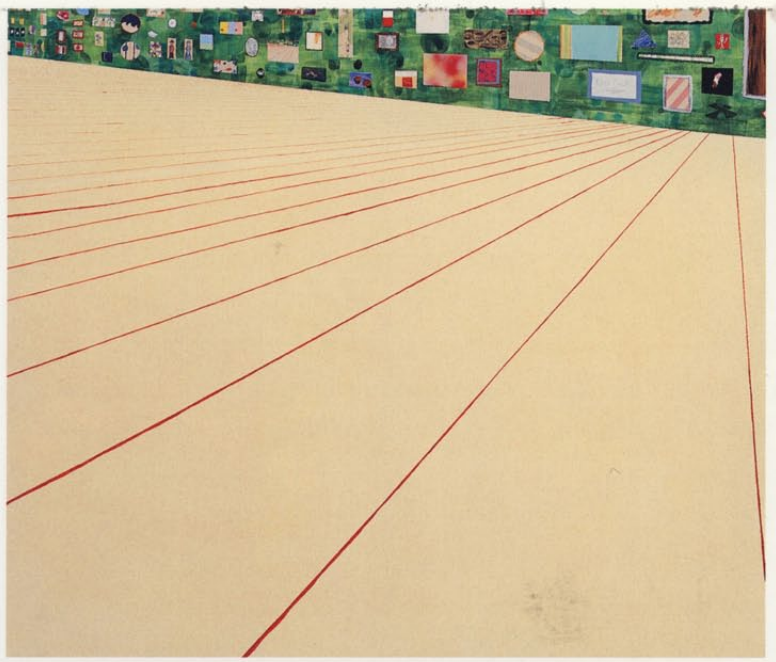
Not surprisingly, Owens is an avid museum-goer endlessly attentive to both images and techniques. As much as she studies classic works housed in the great museums, she also visits often-overlooked museums and galleries specializing in traditional and folk arts. During our studio visit, she revealed

Henri Rousseau
Exotic Landscape, 1910
Oil on canvas
51 1/4 × 64 inches
The Norton Simon Foundation
Pasadena, California

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.



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

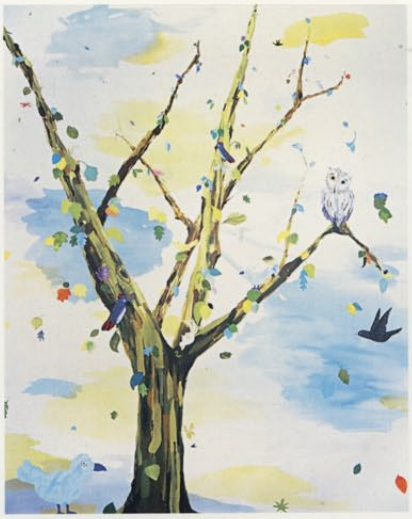
Owens has consistently worked with other artists both in organizing exhibitions and in collaborating on individual works of art. While still a student at CalArts, she organized exhibitions of work by her friends and colleagues. In 1994, for example, she co-organized "The Happy Show" with Monique Prieto, 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



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

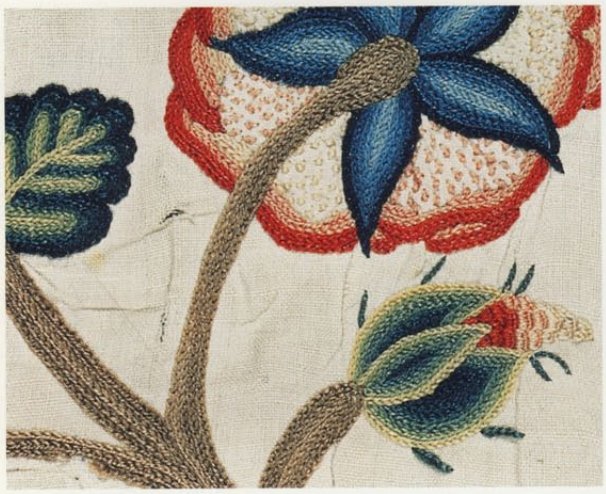
Laura Owens and Scott Reeder
"Heaven and Hell," installation view
China Art Objects Galleries
Los Angeles, 1999

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



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

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.