

A THOUSAND WORDS

Laura Owens TALKS ABOUT HER NEW WORK

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. □

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 mischievousness—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 metastasies of Jonathan Lasker or David Reed. One of a number of LA artists (including Monique Prieto, Steven Hult, 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