

## LAURA OWENS

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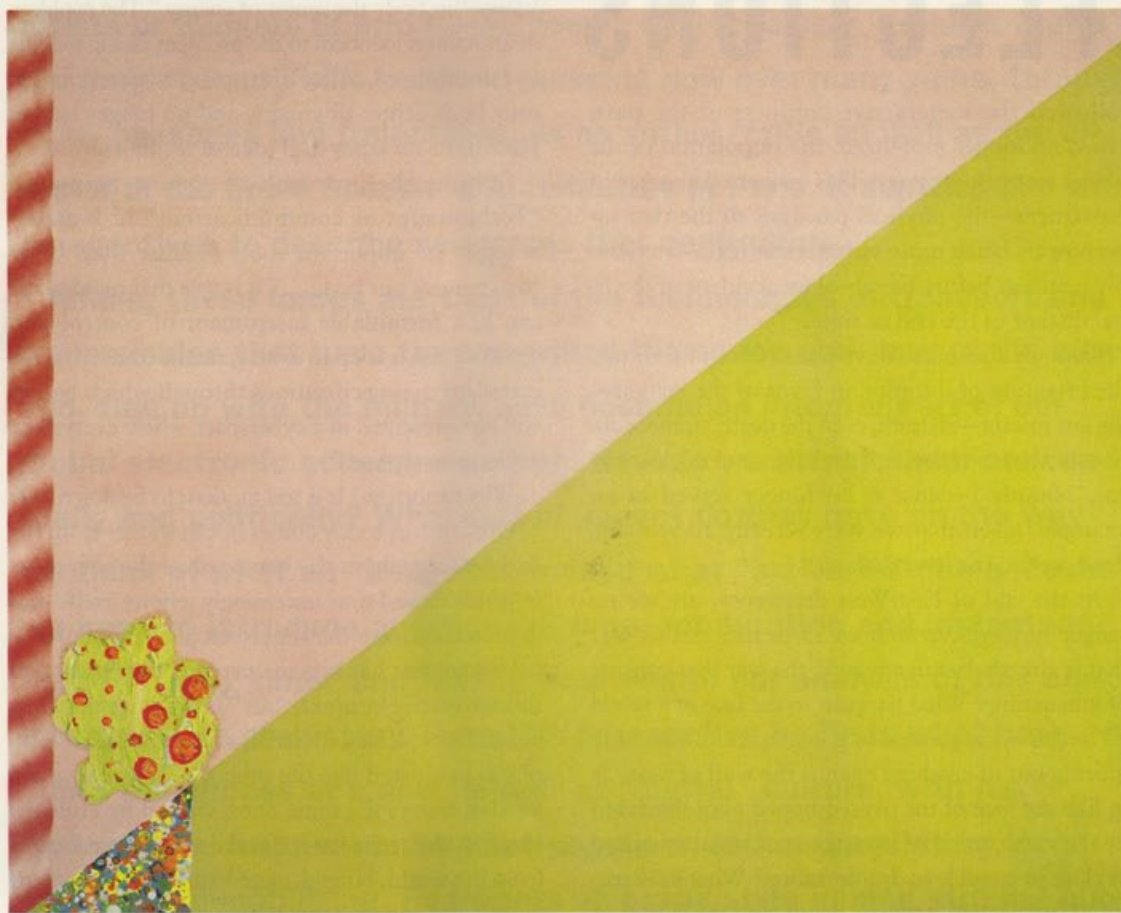
From Frank Stella's fat and fucked-up *objets de hood* to the highly caffeinated überabstractions of artists like David Reed, Fiona Rae, and Fabian Marcaccio, ultraneurotic painting continues to make the global rounds. In a quest for

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

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 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.



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.

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.

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

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



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

to her woeful peers, she cunningly reinvents her practice, charging it with an ambiguous power. □

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