

## LAURA OWENS

BENJAMIN WEISSMAN

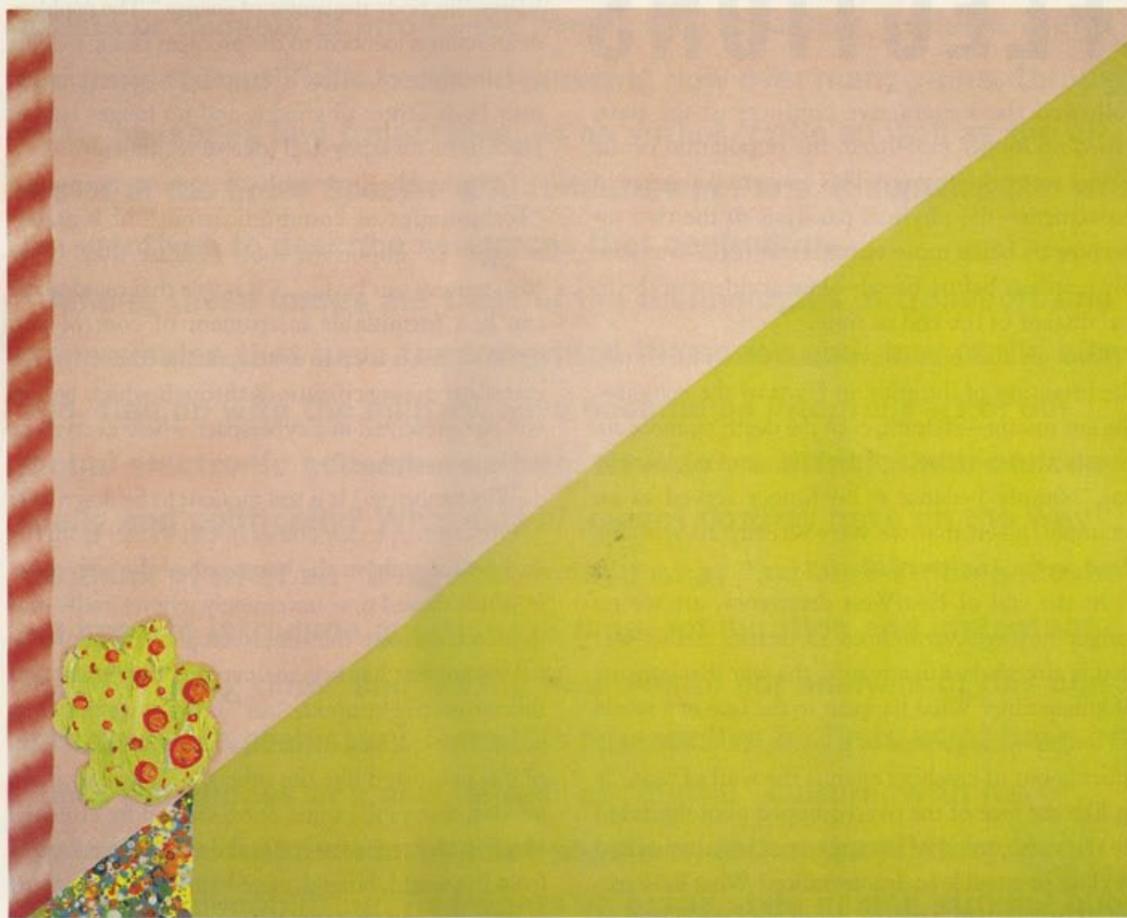
From Frank Stella's fat and fucked-up *objets de hood* to the highly caffeinated überabstractions of artists like David Reed, Fiona Rae, and Fabian Marcaccio, ultraneurotic painting continues to make the global rounds. In a quest for

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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.



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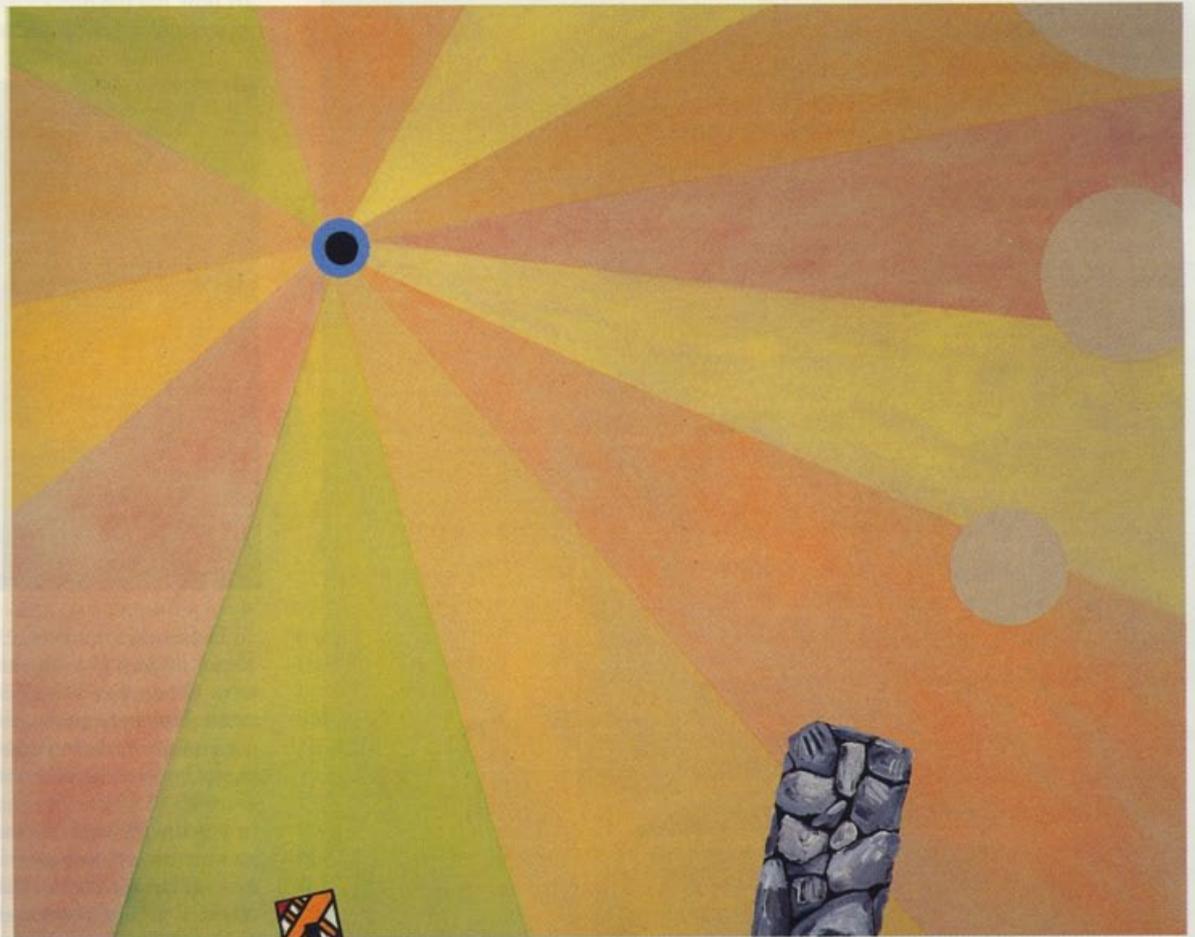
Opposite page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1994**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96" x 10' This page: **Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1995**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 10' x 96"

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



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

Benjamin Weissman is the author of the story collection *Dear Dead Person* (High Risk/Serpent's Tail). He teaches writing at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.



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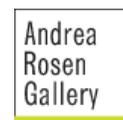
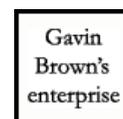


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- May 2016
- April 2016
- March 2016
- February 2016
- January 2016
- December 2015
- [Archive to 1962](#)



## November 1995

TABLE OF CONTENTS

### COLUMNS

**Q & A**  
David Colman on [on the Toronto Film Festival](#)

**BOOKS**  
Lisa Liebmann on [Guy Trebay's In the Place to Be](#)

**FILM**  
David Rimanelli on [Gus Van Sant's To Die For](#)

**GADGET LOVE**  
Brian D'Amato on [Ädaweb](#)

**PREVIEW**  
Allan Schwartzman talks with Richard Armstrong on [Carnegie Internation 1995](#)

**WEATHER REPORT**  
Andrew Ross on [Shiny Clothes](#)

**MUSIC**  
Olivier Zahm on [Dominique A.](#)

**AMERICAN MYTHS**  
J. Hoberman on [a New Contract with America](#)

**TOP TEN**  
Simon Watney's [Real Life Rock](#)

### FEATURES

**FINNISH GILT: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ESKO MÄNNIKÖ**  
Peter Schjeldahl

**WILLEM DE KOONING: CLAM DIGGERS, 1964**  
Paul Muldoon

**A KISS FOR US: CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI 1876-1957**  
John Berger

**NEXT TO NOTHING: THE ART OF TOM FRIEDMAN**  
Bruce Hainley

**REALITY BYTES**  
Andrew Hultkrans talks with Kathryn Bigelow

**CRITICAL REFLECTIONS**  
Paul Virilio with an introduction by John Rajchman

**OPENINGS: LAURA OWENS**  
Benjamin Weissman

### REVIEWS

Elizabeth Armstrong on [Paul Thek](#)

From New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Santa Fe, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Porto, Madrid, Turin, Verona, Paris, Vienna, Cologne, Amsterdam, Uppsala, London, and Melbourne  
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NOVEMBER 1995

**OPENINGS**

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