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ART IN REVIEW

Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH

Laura Owens

Gavin Brown's Enterprise

100 Avenue of the Americas, at Broome Street

SoHo

Through May 10

In group shows and back rooms of galleries over the last two years, Laura Owens's paintings have gained a reputation for their acid colors, physical intelligence and quirky mixtures of styles, conventions and clichés. Ms. Owens, who is from Los Angeles, is less a painter's painter than a skeptic's painter, an artist who plays on the medium's pitfalls and pretensions yet does so without stinting on its visual potential.

Nonetheless, the big, new paintings in her solo debut are guilty of stinting. Overly Conceptual, they replace skepticism with cynicism, and substitute glib asides about ersatz painting trends, commodification and modern decor for the real thing. Ms. Owens's loyalties seem split between David Hockney and Robert Rauschenberg, resulting in well-made paintings that function too much as jokes.

For example, modernist monochrome meets kitsch in a simplified landscape perkily signed by the artist and a striped seascape featuring corny pop-out sea gulls in an abstract illusionist vein. Modernism's subjugation to interior design seems the point of a canvas sprinkled with stain-painted dots and geometric shapes in Helen Frankenthaler pastels. The shapes read as wallpaper until one notices thin black lines organizing some shapes into Calder mobiles or modular lamps (you decide) while setting the remaining particles adrift.

A fashionably severe interior in dark brown includes a cantilevered wood shelf, a vase of flowers, a mirror and a hanging lamp; some parts are painted with the out-of-the-tube glee of a Sunday painter, others with the sophistication of a hard-edge abstractionist. Finally, lest we forget that painting is a commodity whose natural habitat is the "white cube" of the gallery, a fifth canvas depicts two Owens paintings, including the brown interior, hanging on steeply foreshortened walls, which renders them nearly out of sight.

Ms. Owens remains a talent to watch. Still, it's disconcerting to watch while she makes paintings that verge on New Yorker magazine covers. ROBERTA SMITH