



Archness squared: Laura Owens's *Untitled* (detail, 1995)

# Painting Rules

## 'Project Painting'

Lehmann Maupin  
39 Greene Street  
Through October 11

Basillico Fine Arts  
26 Wooster Street  
Through October 11

BY PETER  
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Two nights after viewing the two-gallery group show "Project Painting," I dreamed of discovering great paintings. They were brushy interiors by an old woman whose grandson, I think, importuned me. "Are they worth anything?" he demanded. I was contemptuous. But the first picture was wonderful. The next was better. Then I was raving, "See how a background color in each composition is the star of the painting? Do you have any idea how hard that is? Matisse on his best day had trouble with it!" The kid looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was. So what?

There is nothing resembling the old woman's masterpieces in "Project Painting," which is a game and absorbing attempt to convey the medium's lately renewed charisma with things by 16 mostly youngish and mildly prominent artists. Coming closest is a merely entertaining big picture by 27-year-old Los Angeleno Laura Owens: a "floor" plane of red perspective lines on raw canvas beneath a strip of scumbled green "wall" bearing tiny "paintings" (including an image of the painting itself that includes another possible repeat, suggesting fractal infinity).

Owens's militant irony—archness squared, an advancing weather front of tacit quotation marks—went straight into my dream as a quality of the miraculous background colors of the genius grandmother. Unlike the grandmother's, Owens's stuff is not beautiful, but "about" beauty (or "beauty" or Beauty). She is a graduate of direly brainy CalArts, don't you know. I made the connection when I

woke up, even as I rued the daylight fact that the grandmother's paintings, totally ironic and totally sincere at once, were too good to be true in any known world.

In fact, major quality may be only a dream in painting today. But it's a live one. Painting is mysterious again, full of portent and possibility. Having fallen miles from its former eminence as queen of Western visual culture, it may be finding a rock bottom where conviction can rebound. I have sensed it in the terrific recent show at MOMA of Luc Tuymans, John Currin, and Elizabeth Peyton (of whom only Currin is in "Project Painting") and in the ongoing audacities of, among a few others, Karen Kilimnik (not in "Project Painting" but with a current solo at the 303 Gallery). If I'm right, the next two or so years will witness the first serious boom for dirtied cloth in over a decade.

For now, painting's state remains pretty modest. The very rubric "Project Painting," suggesting a rescue mission, reeks of abasement. It recalls the unfortunate name of another, quite valuable Soho gallery: The Painting Center, which always puts me in mind of a hobbyist headquarters—The Macramé Nook, perhaps. To declare oneself in

favor of painting is willy-nilly to adopt defensive or apologetic tones.

The strongest new painting comes in beneath those tones—obdurately unassuming, with nothing to defend. The solidest example in "Project Painting" is the single canvas by Currin: *Dressmaker*, a sad-eyed, voluptuous Cinderella in bra and panties fitting an ugly dress onto a dressmaker's dummy of skinny, boringly chic proportions. Currin's brushwork and color astound. If you ignore the cartoony subject—difficult to do, but doable—the painting still cooks. Very *école de Currin*, meanwhile, is Lisa Yuskavage, whose two pictures here don't quite pass the same squint test but whose gorgeous, crypto-pornographic imagery is so sensational that it practically doesn't matter.

Most of the other artists in "Project Painting" strike me as, well, too dignified, forcing swanky conceits. But nearly every one has an edge on something, indicating a sea change from a situation where almost nothing in new painting seemed to work to one where almost anything might. Sue Williams brings her neo-Jackson Pollock mode of allover, orgasmic drawing to a new pitch of formal splendor. Matthew Weinstein's *Long Goodbye* forges a toothachy-sweet hybrid look, incorporating photographic printing on layered polyester scrim, that is like 1970s Robert Rauschenberg juiced with late-'60s James Rosenquist. Yum.

As Philip Guston did for an earlier generation, Alex Katz and Chuck Close keep popping up in youngsters' group shows as heroically independent, avuncular old masters. They came here with witty terseness, via a Close portrait of Katz. (When the history of this time is written, other noted forebears will include Tom Nozkowski and the late Moira Dryer.) Peter Cain's Katzian paean to his goateed boyfriend underlines our loss in this artist's recent death. Junior old master Carroll Dunham shows how drawing with paint is done. His elo-

quent mark making rivets. (Where is Terry Winters? His rigor would have lent spine to "Project Painting.")

Too elegant by half, I fear, are Ellen Gallagher's diaphanous clouds of teeny minstrel lips (a worrisome hint of stalled progress since her dazzling debut at Mary Boone two years ago), Nicola Tyson's perfunctory figurative embellishments of geometric abstraction, and Matthew Ritchie's big, undeniably adept palimpsests of wristy drawing and tasty paint. Like Owens, Matthew Antezzo (is this the Matthew Era?) may be too smart for his own good, with paintings based on an old *Artforum* page and a computer graphic. Likewise Guillermo Kuitca, with a hand-drawn roadmap of Northern Ireland. These artists need to realize that Conceptualism is o-u-t out, if only temporarily.

Three gifted painters register indifferently, to my eyes. The Lari Pittmans are standard issue for him, the Shahzia Sikanders are awfully fey, and the Christian Schumanns are plain awful, though staggeringly energetic. But this is not a moment when any painter possessed of originality, as these three are, can be safely discounted. We cannot yet guess what will and won't matter in the near future of painting. The most unlikely-looking invention may turn out to be key.

For a while, our culture lost touch with painting's capacity to do things that nothing else can. Steady shrinkage in the traditional range of those things projected a theoretical zero point. Painters themselves, unnerved, betrayed their medium in deference to photography, reductive aesthetics, political sentiment, and other ascendant shibboleths. Now it is time to observe that, come what may, painting simply cannot zero out, for reasons that painters are rediscovering and freshly exploring, one by one. We are tired of regarding painting as a glass half emptied. It is half full. Better yet, decant its essences into a less pretentious receptacle and, voilà, our cup runneth over. ▣

# art

## Body Work

The body as a mysterious, almost alien place preoccupies photographers Jeanne Dunning and Ann Mandelbaum. In their pictures, flesh becomes an unrecognizable landscape, full of possibility and surprise.

Dunning has always approached this site with a wicked wit, skewering our notions about female attractiveness while creating images of strange, if ambiguous, beauty. In her new show at Feigen Contemporary (535 West 20th Street, through October 11), her subjects are, as usual, young women, but just as often they're simply a sexless expanse of pale, pinkish skin. In most of the pieces, that skin is covered with a creamy gunk that might be vanilla pudding squeezed from a tube. Coating unidentifiable flesh in fat, tunnellike mounds, the stuff suggests the body turned inside out—eviscerated, violated—but Dunning tends to treat it as sensuous topography, otherworldly terrain.

Other pictures allow us a fuller view of women from whose nude bodies viscous syrup appears to be seeping. In her titles, Dunning calls the ooze "food" but, slathered all over one woman and puddling around another as she sleeps, it's more like some body-snatching sci-fi pus David Cronenberg dreamed up. Or it could be that Dunning is only making emotional leakage alarmingly literal. The series is "about the idea of being overwhelmed by and enveloped in something," she says in a catalogue interview. "Maybe you're losing yourself in yourself."

Mandelbaum brings us back to the mystery with her exquisitely tactile and suggestive prints of body parts that swim up out of a soft-focus, solarized fog like bits of reanimated flesh. In her show at Ubu (16 East 78th Street, through October 25), mouths are caves filled with shimmering water, tongues spring rudely to life or sit against one another like smooth river stones, and nipples become blind eyes. Hair sprouts voluptuously, as abstract as brush strokes, as visceral as a caterpillar. The repressed body fragments, morphs, and comes back to haunt us. —VINCE ALETTI



Obdurately unassuming: John Currin's *Dressmaker* (1995)

PHOTOS BY ROBILYN HOLLAND