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ART IN REVIEW

By ROBERTA SMITH

Laura Owens

Gavin Brown's Enterprise

436 West 15th Street

Chelsea

Through Nov. 14

Laura Owens's second solo exhibition in New York improves upon her first. Irony is down and visual interest up. The two are not necessarily inversely related, but with Ms. Owens they may be. Her work is rife with quips about high modernism and its spillover effects on design, kitsch and gender stereotypes, and the way she paints is part of the commentary. Such interests continue here, but the big picture, as it were, feels largely sincere -- full of buoyant, inventively beautiful pictorial effects and suggestive contrasts that don't boil down to simple conceptual jokes.

As is usual with Ms. Owens's work, the lack of overlap between the untitled paintings is noteworthy. Each work has its own character. A couple of them can make you think of wallpaper or shower-curtain patterns, except that scale and material turn them into much more. Another, featuring an orange beehive, evokes children's book illustration.

In the most memorable, the devices of stain painting -- broad arcs of green, blue and tan -- create a big, wheeling earth's-curve sense of space. Over this are scattered notational marks, thick and mildly Expressionistic, that flatten the space but also drift aimlessly, as if a swatch of landscape had been splintered and tossed into orbit.

Ms. Owens is constantly undercutting or contradicting one's first reaction. Girlish doodles extend over an entire surface with mounting intensity and control, to be perversely signed in an upside-down cursive flourish: "Laura." Thick paint plays off thin or none at all.

What is beautiful is also funny. The message here is that the medium of painting, which remains above all a surface to be engagingly animated, contains quite a bit of uncharted territory and that

the old dog of formalism, unfettered by pure abstraction, can learn all sorts of new tricks.

ROBERTA SMITH
