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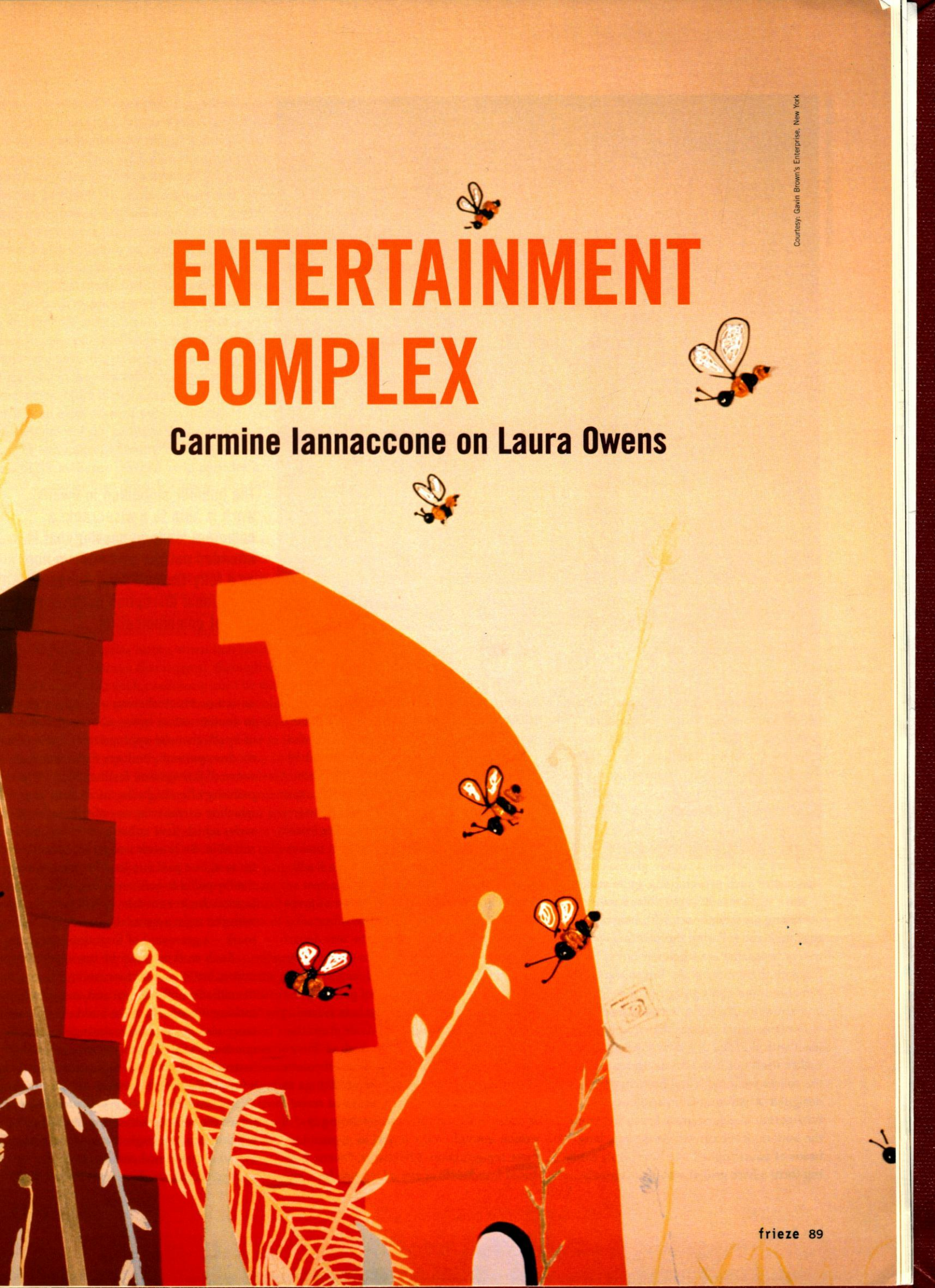
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ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

Carmine Iannaccone on Laura Owens

Courtesy, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York



When the interplay between 'high' and 'low' was in full swing in the 60s, it was often pictured humorously as something illicit. 'Vulgar' art forms like comics and graffiti were cast as randy street mutts who had found their way into the pedigree kennel of fine art while the breeder wasn't looking. But it didn't take long for the discussion to be rephrased in terms of critical 'strategies', with fine artists quoting the popular arts in either style or content. Much current art practice simply scraps the distinction altogether. The difference between high and low is irrelevant for many younger artists because all art forms must now answer to a new and common point of reference: entertainment. One attitude suggests that the fine arts should take themselves more seriously as a form of entertainment, and likewise that entertainment be taken more seriously as of value in the fine arts. Perhaps this is a characteristic of our age – an inescapable standard set by the omnipresent media, each form of which competes for our time and attention.

If so, this means that painting must accommodate itself to a new way of being seen. As entertainment, a painting cannot assume the automatic privilege of intense scrutiny, but must work when in the periphery of a viewer's consciousness. In fact, it may need to work best in that capacity. What is lost in dramatic focus is gained in a more generalised sense of presence; in the same way many films make themselves far more present through their extraneous manifestations – billboards, adverts, previews, reviews – than during the 90 minutes in which the movie gets (supposedly) your full attention.

Laura Owens makes art that functions on the periphery of one's consciousness. Her painting is a social, rather than a subjective exercise: rather than constructing a singular voice, it defines itself in relation to many other voices, past and present. For some viewers, this is a weakness; for others, it's the point. She's been compared to everyone from Barnett Newman to Helen Frankenthaler to David Hockney, but her pictures also implicate a wider state of affairs. They need to be seen in relation to interior design and architecture, and within the context of the issues of lifestyle and human exchange articulated therein. Her work requires a generous point of view – not to be seen as the hermetic communion between painting as a singular point of transmission and viewer as sensitive entity that receives, interprets and reacts (as though any school of painting ever succeed in engineering that mythical condition). A state of affairs is not the same thing as a state of mind.

Owens' early work was often put down for being 'jokey'. Indeed, the first issue many of her pictures raise is the question of just how seriously they should be taken. In one piece (all Owens' paintings are untitled) from her 1997 solo debut in New York, she presented a stylised seascape that was so dopey as to be provocative. A set of blue horizontal stripes along the lower edge of the canvas represent the ocean. In the pale blue field above, two impastoed V-shaped marks read as juvenile shorthand for seagulls, with spray-painted shadows to make them look as if they're hovering off the surface. Meanwhile, a third mark, just a floating dot with trompe l'oeil shadow, seems to be apologising for the whole thing as some kind of perceptual exercise. But at 3 x 2.5 m, the painting not only declares itself as gauche, but as intentionally gauche. From the outset, Owens announced herself as an artist whose sense of humour we were going to have to take seriously. The problem is, hers is not a 'serious' sense of humour: it is not satirical, nor is it particularly ironic. If anything, the humour embodied in her work is more akin to a wisecrack: a comment made in passing that is intended neither as criticism nor as a fully-fledged joke, but as an intentional disruption in the normal flow of communication. In another work from 1997, the artist recreated a schematic diagram intended to illustrate one-point perspective. Two rows of skyscraper-like forms

Untitled 1998
Acrylic and pen on canvas 168 x 183 cm





Untitled 1999
Acrylic on canvas 305 x 305 cm

are depicted receding nicely toward a vanishing point, except for one oddball that stands out of line like a sore thumb. It's an intentional non-sequitur that means nothing really, and works only insofar as it highlights – through disruption – the viewer's expectations in a given situation. A wisecrack.

You might expect Owens' mammoth canvases to possess a certain gravitas, but she dashes such expectations, quite willing to leave vast areas of canvas blank, while obsessing on other zones with neurotic fussiness and infusing the paintings with a quirky levity that is completely out of keeping with their sheer scale. But this kind of visual humour can't pull its own weight and knows it. There's a 'second-hand' quality to many of her images that readily aligns itself with the idea of kitsch. One place this makes itself felt is in Owens' treatment of the spaces we inhabit and how they are designed. A painting from 1998 depicts transparent blades of grass sprouting from the bottom of the canvas. At the top, long beads of paint applied like heavy-duty caulking form a bare grid of wobbly diagonals.

The result is reminiscent of the murals encountered in hospitals, offices, or other institutions trying their best to be cheerful – while resolving to break up the admitted monotony of the space, they also work hard to stay bland. Like other pieces by the artist that use an equally soulless kind of patterning, it's not how this painting quotes kitsch that makes it perplexing, but how it makes a spectacle of the way kitsch effaces itself.

Surprisingly, this approach was best demonstrated in a 1998 exhibition of Jorge Pardo. The exhibition comprised four sets of bedroom suites displayed the way department stores arrange mock-ups of domestic interiors. Each suite included, as a kind of set dressing, one of a series of paintings by Owens depicting cartoon-like bees hovering around a silly-looking hive. Aside from the sentimental play on homemakers as 'busy bees', the suspiciously well-balanced palette of Autumnal hues in each picture brings to mind a prefabricated, over-designed sense of order. Furthermore, each painting is similar enough to the others to appear as a mere reproduction. Effectively, Owens produced knock-offs of her own work for a sit-

The humour embodied in Owens' work is akin to a wisecrack: a comment made in passing that is intended neither as criticism nor as a fully-fledged joke, but as an intentional disruption in the normal flow of communication.

uation in which she was already peripheral to another artist. It was not just the motifs of kitsch that she appropriated, but its modus operandi. Perhaps that's why the sense of fashion and fashionability in her painting often includes, more than that which is current, the out-of-date tastes and styles which have subsequently become invisible. Brickwork and an amoeba-like form in one painting look hopelessly 60s; the limpid blue landscape in another recalls Japonisme; yet another looks like wallpaper with the artist's name displayed as a trademark – a graveyard of forgotten styles.

Such work may not be intended as decoration, but it comes close enough to keep the situation off-balance and somewhat disturbing. Owens does not build critical distance into the way her paintings entertain questions of style, design, or taste, opting instead to plunge each piece into the fray as a full participant. When the pictures threaten to become designer accoutrements, as in the Pardo installation, a new level of crisis is achieved, as though the work were escaping all conventional paradigms for being understood as art. Amongst Owens' work

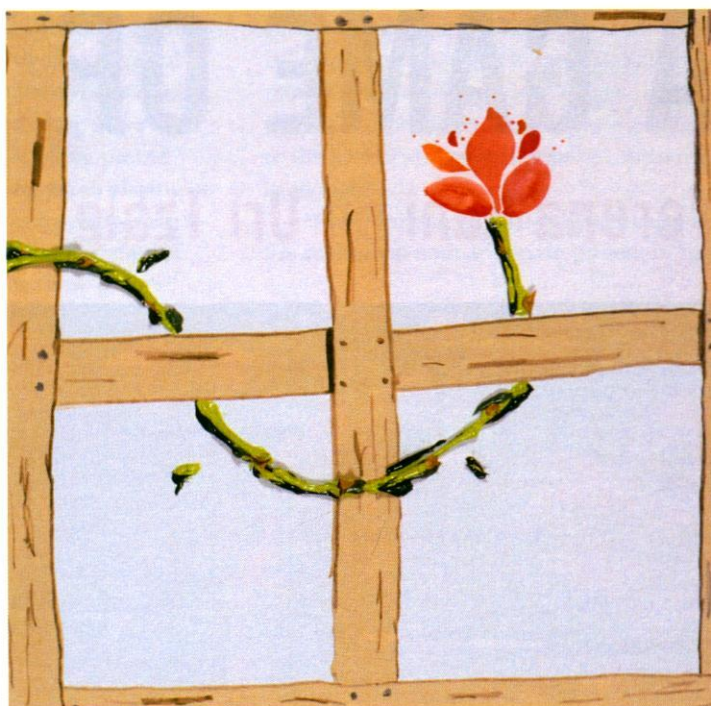
are any number of flower paintings whose motif has seemingly been chosen precisely for the way it has lost its currency in the fine arts while simultaneously retaining its viability for surface and textile designers. In one such painting from 1998, the edges of the canvas are painted with goofy wood grain to look like the frame of a window, complete with two crossbars that divide the whole into four empty panes. A single vine, like a fat, green worm, threads its way through these thinly brushed crosspieces, culminating in a flower which is merely an empty form, produced as if with a stencil.

In one neat composition, the artist has combined three entirely different visual vernaculars, each with its own raft of associations: the cartoonist's caricature of surface texture, the fine artist's impasto and the folk artist's stencil. The result is a picture that participates in none of these languages but rings hollow. The painting adopts the pose of a painting – drawing attention to its own means of expression the way a dandy draws attention to his carefully cultivated attire. More than an expression of self-consciousness, costume is an expression of public consciousness, an awareness of what others will see and how they will react.

The sociability of Owens' work expresses a similar consciousness of the audience. Several early canvases depict interiors comprised mostly of floor space leading up to a thin sliver of wall at the top edge of the picture. Dramatic orthogonals painted on the floor position the viewer in relation to the image with the kind of heavy-handedness that won't let you forget that the experience is about how the viewer stands before the picture. Since the rooms depicted are galleries with paintings on the wall, Owens questions the singular authority of the artist in respect to presentation, seeming to suggest that it's not objects that are repositioned by art, but audiences that are repositioned before those objects. Something becomes art, her orthogonal galleries imply, when that positioning is skewed or off-kilter. The paintings also suggest, through their own exaggerated theatricality, that such conditions can't be sustained forever; that this situation has to grow more relaxed as art objects enter into circulation with all other objects. But Owens wants it both ways – she makes pictures which have been rigidly posed to look unassuming.

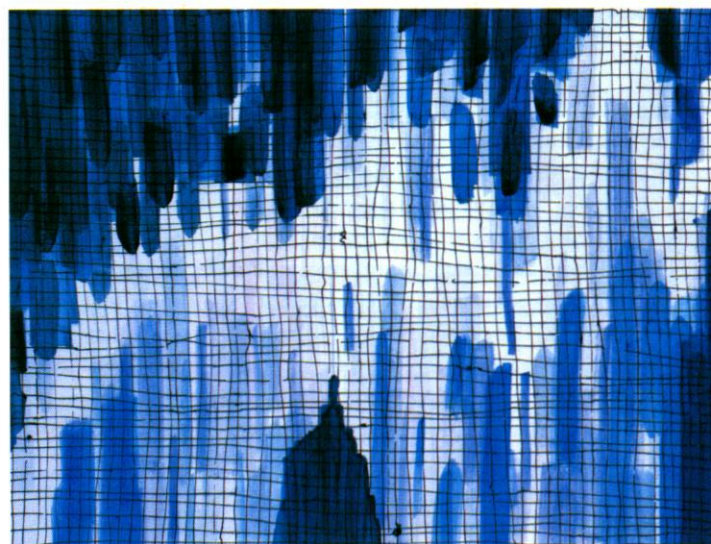
Sometimes they even try to disappear. One 1998 landscape was presented on stretchers so large they barely cleared the floor and ceiling of the Los Angeles gallery where the painting was first exhibited. In fact, it was possible to walk right past the work and not even know it was there because 90 percent of the surface had been painted the same shade of white as the gallery wall. In one upper corner and along the lower edge of the painting, little windows of imagery with scalloped edges punctuate the expanse of white, making it clear that this blank field actually represents a bank of fog. Through the openings, fragments of a forest beyond can be glimpsed.

But it was not the painting that was assimilated into the gallery's architecture in this installation, but the gallery that was drawn into the painting. The casual alliance between painting and other branches of design and decor in Owens' work makes the art gallery look like just another part of the general visual culture which we inhabit. Her work addresses the question of whether painting is thought of as part of the image-stream into which we are baptised, or as something distinct from it; whether art is merely another form of entertainment – just as influential, just as incidental – and whether an artist who would have it so is being ambitious or trying to lower our expectations, or is just calling for us to accept the true state of visual culture.



Untitled 1998
Oil and acrylic on canvas 61 x 61 cm

Courtesy: Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York



Untitled 1999
Acrylic on canvas 126 x 164 cm

Courtesy: Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York