

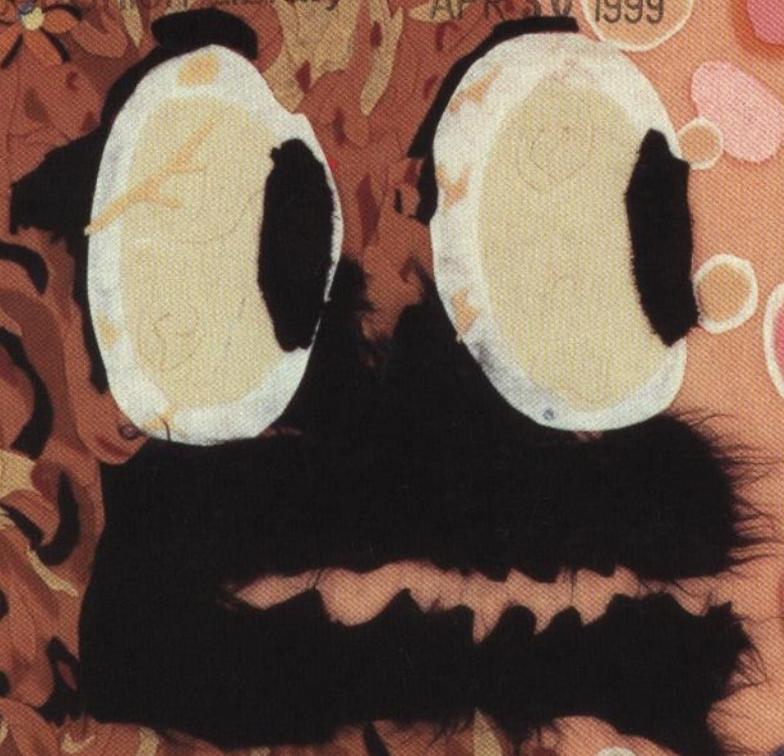
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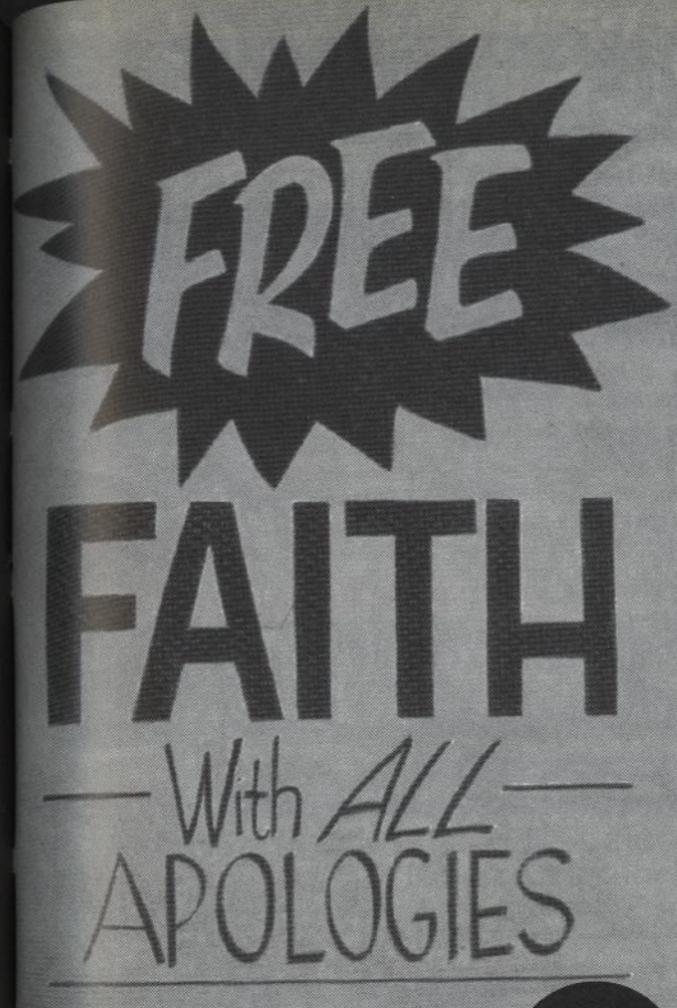
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FOR THE ARTS



Carol Jackson
Free Fries with All Sandwiches, 1998. Tooled leather,
dye, acrylic, enamel, 31" x 21". Courtesy of Ten in One
Gallery. See page 32.



on the cover:
John Spear
Best of Show/Canis Major/Adopt A Pet
(detail), 1999. Mixed media, 104" x 83".
Courtesy Ten in One Gallery. See page 32.

CHICAGO

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The Chicago New Art Association is a
not-for-profit organization whose pur-
pose is to examine the definition and
transmission of culture in our society;
the decision-making processes within
museums and schools and the agen-
cies of patronage which determine
the manner in which culture shall be
transmitted; the value systems which
presently influence the making of art
as well as its study in exhibitions and
books; and, in particular, the interac-
tion of these factors within the visual
arts milieu.

IT IS HER ABSOLUTE INDIFFERENCE TO ANY CONSISTENT METHOD OR STRATEGY THAT STANDS OUT IN THE END.



Laura Owens
Untitled, 1998, at ACME. Acrylic and oil on canvas, two panels, 114" x 50" each. All images courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

LAURA OWENS: CROSS COUNTRY TRILOGY LOS ANGELES CHICAGO NEW YORK

BY JAN TUMIR, JAN ESTEP, AND YVETTE BRACKMAN

Last fall Laura Owens coordinated and presented three contemporaneous exhibitions in the United States, at ACME in Los Angeles (6150 Wilshire Blvd., 90048, 213/857-5942), Crown Center Gallery at Loyola University in Chicago (6525 N. Sheridan Rd., 60626, 773/508-3811), and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York (436 W. 15th St., 10014, 212/627-5258): three sets of paintings made in three respective cities. The grouping of shows provided three different writers the chance to assess the painter's most recent body of work and the state of contemporary painting in general.

GENTLE PURPOSE

by Jan Tumir in Los Angeles

I should mention at the outset that I have never been especially fond of Laura Owens's work, and have for long been baffled by the widespread support it found almost immediately out here in Los Angeles and now elsewhere as well. In fact, I remember thinking that the paintings that comprised her first solo outing at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in 1995 exemplified all the worst aspects of so-called '90s art. Products of a calculated slackerish neglect or plain incompetence, the lot of them seemed like unpromising beginnings inexplicably propped up as finished product. Colliding hyper-inflated ambition with what looks like the complete lack thereof in a manner that was quickly becoming codified as the reigning mode of the moment, her consistently oversized canvases recalled the epic, SenSurround aspirations of earlier schools of American abstraction. They nodded in passing to both painterly and post-painterly varieties, but without the slightest trace of their original "purposiveness," to borrow a term from Kant. A much more wanton and flaccid sensibility prevailed here; an emphatically girlish regime of cutesy-pie color and teeny-weeny form. Febrile gesture would trail off toward doodling indeterminacy or dissolution, to be sopped up by patches of canvas left bare, or just barely tinted with pigment. No strong argument anywhere in sight for mastering the medium or surface, large portions of which were simply ignored and then set off against compact areas of heightened

fuss, where paint was raised in pimply daubs and straight-from-the-tube spurts into dense topographic clusters. The way it was painted wreaked havoc with even the broadest, most generous configurations of the Greenbergian grid.

Greenberg would have been appalled at this work, no doubt, but to label it thereby critical or even challenging would be to greatly overstate the point. The point to be made here is, rather, that this last comment about painting no longer reads critically itself, which only goes to show how quickly and completely the discourse of art, and in particular painting, has shifted since the time of my own education in the '80s. To claim that Owens's consciousness of this discourse was from the first moment willfully dim is not necessarily such

a bad thing any longer; nor should we presume her naive, necessarily, for applying such a light touch to as weighty a matter as painting. Perhaps she has recognized that history simply comes with the territory, and that all of the big statements the painters of my own generation felt compelled to make at every opportunity (concerning the impact of outlying technologies, for starters) have been well and truly absorbed by now, and require no further attention from her. To take up a painterly practice in this day and age is to position oneself, more or less automatically, in relation to all the big statements ever made on the subject. This will happen regardless of what one actually chooses to do there—that is, whatever one chooses to do to any particular painting will to some extent be done to painting in general. It is one of the great benefits of this medium's untimely status that it allows for instant immersion in a rich historical dialogue, once all of the initial propositions have already been established. Owens acknowledges this potential by shrugging it off. This is what her contribution consists of—a gesture that is partly oblivious, partly tactical, and delivered without a trace of arrogance or irony.

Clearly, she is interested neither in pushing painting forward or regressing it in any pointed manner, nor does she appear to hesitate between these two options. Here and there, a kind of self-reflexivity begins to take shape—some vague incentive aimed at blocking the experience of airy space these large canvases naturally evoke, or turning it inside out by recourse to the various *mise-en-abyme*, picture-within-picture tropes that Surrealism has made so familiar—but these tendencies are inevitably abandoned before any sort of explicit articulation can occur. On a more flattering note, one could say that her works actively perform a “resistance to language,” as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe once put it, by continually reneging on the readings that they themselves initiate. One is indeed hard pressed to categorize them in even the broadest terms, be they “abstract” or “representational,” or (again) caught in-between. Like so much of the painting that came out of the '80s, they pursue “representational” means toward “abstract”

ends, and vice versa, but this catch-all explanation hardly brings us much closer to grasping what really is or is not at stake here. Because, over and above this play with flip-flopping categories, it is her absolute indifference to any consistent method or strategy that stands out in the end.

It would have been difficult to determine at such an early stage in the game that laxity was itself emerging as a viable program, that it could be approached with some degree of rigor, and in effect would be subsequently refined and even perfected in its effects—which points either to the extreme foresight or the gullibility of collectors in this town (another baffling matter). At any rate, this possibility has been amply fulfilled with her most recent show at ACME. If Owens was from the start eager to throw off the archaic weight and *gravitas* of her chosen practice, then the pastoral course she chose to follow here has provided the ideal way out—down a quaint country road, past a pond of deep



Laura Owens
Untitled (detail), 1998, at Crown Center Gallery at Loyola University. Acrylic on canvas, 120" x 480".

oceanic blue, and a succession of trees that remain charming even in their most twisted complexity. One of these just barely emerges from its white gessoed background like an underpainting for a watercolor; a faint morning vision, but also a supremely precarious pictorial construct, poised on an act of counter-bravura almost equal in its tentative openness to the integrated all-over mastery that once characterized Abstract Expressionism, for instance. I do not mean by this to suggest any sort of exotic talent for finessing “the bad” into “the good,” because this is scrupulously avoided here as a last vestige of painterly agnosticism that has no place in this experience of crude and easy joy.

It has taken me some time to find the value in this work. It has everything to do with this facility purged of aggression, an ease that does seem to come easily but is at

the same time hard-won because it is rooted in a logic of sacrifice—of talent, skill, and even to some extent intelligence; all of the things that must go if one is to maintain an authentically experimental attitude. The public loves these paintings because they continue to surprise, and it is as simple as that in the end. Owens revitalizes her archaic medium without trickery or outlandishness, which is surprising in itself. Painting returns here as painting, as painting about itself as well as something else. In these scenes of a somewhat too-friendly nature, she has found the perfect counterpart to her rigorously unsophisticated technique. Converting their modest charms to the massive

scale and materiality of an authentically painterly experience, with all of its privileged connections to “the real” still intact, I am reminded of a Walter Benjamin quote concerning storybook illustration as a “wall (that) opens up,” revealing “more brightly colored walls . . . behind it.” Benjamin found in the best storybook pictures a gentle purpose that lies well out of the reach of more conventional painting. Essentially edenic, he describes their “fantastic play” of color and line as “the home of memory without yearning.” I suspect that this is precisely what Laura Owens's paintings show us as well.

Jan Tumlir is an artist and writer who lives in Los Angeles.

THESE PANELS ARE SO “LITE” AND SEDUCTIVE THAT THEY GIVE THE EFFECT THAT MAYBE ANGST IS JUST PLAIN BORING.

ROAD TRIP

by Jan Estep in Chicago

Like Tumlir, I feel compelled to say something right up front, I am not a fan of bad painting. I mean, the idea of “bad painting” intrigues me, and I appreciate its place within the historical discourse about painting in general. I even appreciate its anti-authoritarian, in-your-high-standards-face quality, and the gumption that shows a distinct disdain for a cultivated, elitist notion of what counts in the canon and who gets to decide such matters. But beyond the concept, bad painting does precisely what it sets out to do: it fails to deliver “good” painting, or, rather, paintings with which you want to spend any time. Bad painting may be hip in some circles, but it's really depressing. As a viewer, I find it hard to invest much in it.

I hated the first piece I saw of Laura Owens, a roughly five-by-five-foot canvas at Beret International Gallery in Chicago, 1996. I thought it was just another bad painting about bad painting. Here we went again, the impoverished state of painting today, its identity crisis in the trail of Postmodernism, its failure to hold up under the weight of transcendental ideas, and its abject, self-conscious acceptance of all of this. The canvas was nearly vacant except for a few squiggles of brown and black paint at the bottom two corners. Painting was falling off the edge, so poor and humbled was it. I imagined I could feel the shamed artist-painter bemoaning, yet arrogantly embracing her pathetic plight. And I was tired of being “challenged” in this sophomoric way to accept an ironic condition as the state of things for painting.

But I'm always willing to give artists a second chance; people can surprise you, their style and philosophy can change. When I heard about Owens's cross-national project: three different

shows linked to three distinct galleries all occurring roughly at the same time, I was impressed with the ambition of it. That ambition hinted at something more than an incestuous, dead-end desire to perpetuate bad painting, and questioned the nature of our ambition as viewers: would we make the trip to see all the work, or would most of us only imagine the whole series in our minds? The conceptual structure was readily apparent: the East-coast paintings would be painted in New York, the West-coast paintings in Los Angeles, and the middle-American paintings would be painted in Chicago. Each set of works would reflect the specifics of geographical locale and the particular gallery installation sites. All would be open at the same time, creating an aesthetically, theoretically coupled reverberation across the States. Such interactive behavior is normally considered the domain of site-specific, mixed-media installation or performative work, but in this project Owens borrowed some of that behavioral language for painting. Parameters were set up that mandated a particular kind of engagement, forcing a literal travelling that had the potential to create a shift in the work, redirecting “business as usual” into a transnational aesthetic field trip.

The south wall of the elongated gallery at Loyola University is all glass; this in turn looks out on to another glass wall, an east wall that fronts Lake Michigan directly. It's an unexpected view—all you see is one long horizon line, not even a beach or the rest of the campus—and it often competes with what's on display in the gallery. For the Chicago show Owens was in town for a weeklong residency and spent some of that time in a rented car driving through Indiana. A single, 40-foot, stretched-canvas painting was the result. Taking up the entire length of one wall, *Untitled* depicts a long horizon line where sky meets water, nearly on par with the horizon line visible through the two glass walls of the gallery. A subtly shifting rainbow of pastel blues and sea greens marks the water, which occupies two-thirds of the canvas. And a large mound of sand sits dead center, breaking the horizon line, either a famous Indiana sand dune or one of the equally well-known restructured trash dumps strewn throughout the area, the highest

hills visible in these flat lands. Odd little cheery flowers speckle the beach and sand hill, the stems arcing repeatedly across the canvas, and raw canvas clouds float across the sky. The scene feels original and familiar at the same time, on the one hand, a contemplative idyl that's almost too cheery, and on the other, a flat-footed gloss on the traditional landscape.

Owens comes through bad painting like an adolescent stage to something new and more hopeful, even though traces of its belligerence linger. Dumb gestures—paint squeezed out of a tube directly onto the canvas to form a flower's stem or the circle of a bright orange sun—take on authority. Intentionally naïve representational

DUMB GESTURES TAKE ON AUTHORITY.



Laura Owens
Untitled, 1998, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Acrylic on canvas, 66" x 72".

drawing makes use of a Minimalist, Modernist caché: spare composition, judicious and economical mark making, a flattened space, and the hint of a grid. The verge toward badness instead veers in the direction of sumptuous painting: juicy Twizzle sticks of pure pigment, coolly rendered atmospheric impressions, and a soothing designer's palette of sandstone cliff taupe, squash blossom orange, celadon green, and flyaway blue. Even the expanse of the painting seems to indicate freshness and possibility. Compared to that earlier piece, this is one hell of a happy painting, throwing out the water while still cuddling the smiling baby.

Jan Estep is an artist and Associate Editor of New Art Examiner.

ON THE SHIFTY PLANE

by Yvette Blackman in New York

These paintings are on the edge and positively satisfied with their condition. Grand in scale and dapper in content, Laura Owens's paintings give one the sense that we should all be eating cake and loving it. They are sedate and theatrical at the same time. Their spatial play is so mannered, so controlled that in their nature has met up with reason and has decided that its time to have a tea party.

The inorganic palette in a range of housepaint colors camouflage the romantic nature theme in all of the pieces. In the main gallery

pleasant and inviting with its cream-colored cliffs and peaks until you reach the top and realize that one peak is inverted causing your gaze to be smashed back up against the surface and leaving you no place to roam.

Behind this work was an eleven-foot-tall painting that has an almost giddy optical after-effect sense to it, like when you stare off into space and see circles floating all around you. This vertical spectacle is made of thin multicolored loops sprinkled on a pale background scrawled out like a dizzy Cy Twombly.

In the back room was a large painting of a beehive with a brown, rust, and orange '70s color scheme. Humming around the hive are lovely plump bumblebees that dapple the whole canvas. Buzzing off languidly in different directions, their movement belies the intensity and focus of their rigorous schematic work. Owens's paintings parallel the work of the bees in its finicky, yet goopy presence. The X-ray patterns of vegetal forms at the base of the canvas cut through the beehive and expose the blanched flatness throughout. Her visual structures are perceptually rigorous; her content is light-hearted and feathery.

Endless space, a feeling of frivolous largesse collapses repeatedly, forcing you into the consciousness of the boundary lines that the flat colors staunchly uphold. Where the Italian Rococo artist Giovanni Tiepolo beguiled the viewer into the illusion of his frescos, Owens's paintings are discriminating sucker punches for those who think the encounter is only on the surface or in the great beyond of the illusion. Laura's world is about mood, and moods don't have a location. They have a stance that is evanescent; it's caught on canvas but you can't hold on to it.

Her two panoramic scrawl paintings luxuriate in histrionic gestures of lighthearted effect. These floor-to-ceiling vertical panels are so “lite” and seductive that they give the effect that maybe angst is just plain boring. Their brazen playfulness with curlicues and drifting splotches of color ease and expand giving a sense of coy release. Owens's is a world of fantasy and grace with moments of irony in which she makes clear that these doodles and smudge are just as they are—grand in their defenselessness. **NEW|ART**

Yvette Brackman is an artist and writer living in New York.

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Clearly, she is interested neither in pushing painting forward or regressing it in any pointed manner, nor does she appear to hesitate between these two options. Here and there, a kind of self-reflexivity begins to take shape--some vague incentive aimed at blocking the experience of airy space these large canvases naturally evoke, or turning it inside out by recourse to the various *mise-en-abyme*, picture-within-picture tropes that Surrealism has made so familiar--but these tendencies are inevitably abandoned before any sort of explicit articulation can occur. On a more flattering note, one could say that her works actively perform a "resistance to language," as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe once put it, by continually reneging on the readings that they themselves initiate. One is indeed hard pressed to categorize them in even the broadest terms, be they "abstract" or "representational," or (again) caught in-between. Like so much of the painting that came out of the '80s, they pursue "representational" means toward "abstract" ends, and vice versa, but this catch-all explanation hardly brings us much closer to grasping what really is or is not at stake here. Because, over and above this play with flip-flopping categories, it is her absolute indifference to any consistent method or strategy that stands out in the end.

It would have been difficult to determine at such an early stage in the game that laxity was itself emerging as a viable program, that it could be approached with some degree of rigor, and in effect would be subsequently refined and even perfected in its effects--which points either to the extreme foresight or the gullibility of collectors in this town (another baffling matter). At any rate, this possibility has been amply fulfilled with her most recent show at ACME. If Owens was from the start eager to throw off the archaic weight and gravitas of her chosen practice, then the pastoral course she chose to follow here has provided the ideal way out--down a quaint country road, past a pond of deep oceanic blue, and a succession of trees that remain charming even in their most twisted complexity. One of these just barely emerges from its white gessoed background like an underpainting for a watercolor; a faint morning vision,

but also a supremely precarious pictorial construct, poised on an act of counter-bravura almost equal in its tentative openness to the integrated all-over mastery that once characterized Abstract Expressionism, for instance. I do not mean by this to suggest any sort of exotic talent for finessing "the bad" into "the good," because this is scrupulously avoided here as a last vestige of painterly agonism that has no place in this experience of crude and easy joy.

It has taken me some time to find the value in this work. It has everything to do with this facility purged of aggression, an ease that does seem to come easily but is at the same time hard-won because it is rooted in a logic of sacrifice--of talent, skill, and even to some extent intelligence; all of the things that must go if one is to maintain an authentically experimental attitude. The public loves these paintings because they continue to surprise, and it is as simple as that in the end. Owens revitalizes her archaic medium without trickery or outlandishness, which is surprising in itself. Painting returns here as painting, as painting about itself as well as something else. In these scenes of a somewhat too-friendly nature, she has found the perfect counterpart to her rigorously unsophisticated technique. Converting their modest charms to the massive scale and materiality of an authentically painterly experience, with all of its privileged connections to "the real" still intact, I am reminded of a Walter Benjamin quote concerning storybook illustration as a "wall (that) opens up," revealing "more brightly colored walls ... behind it." Benjamin found in the best storybook pictures a gentle purpose that lies well out of the reach of more conventional painting. Essentially edenic, he describes their "fantastic play" of color and line as "the home of memory without yearning." I suspect that this is precisely what Laura Owens's paintings show us as well.

ADDED MATERIAL

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Laura Owens Untitled (detail), 1998, at Crown Center Gallery at Loyola University. Acrylic on canvas, 120" × 480".

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