

contemporary visual arts

incorporating **WORLD ART**

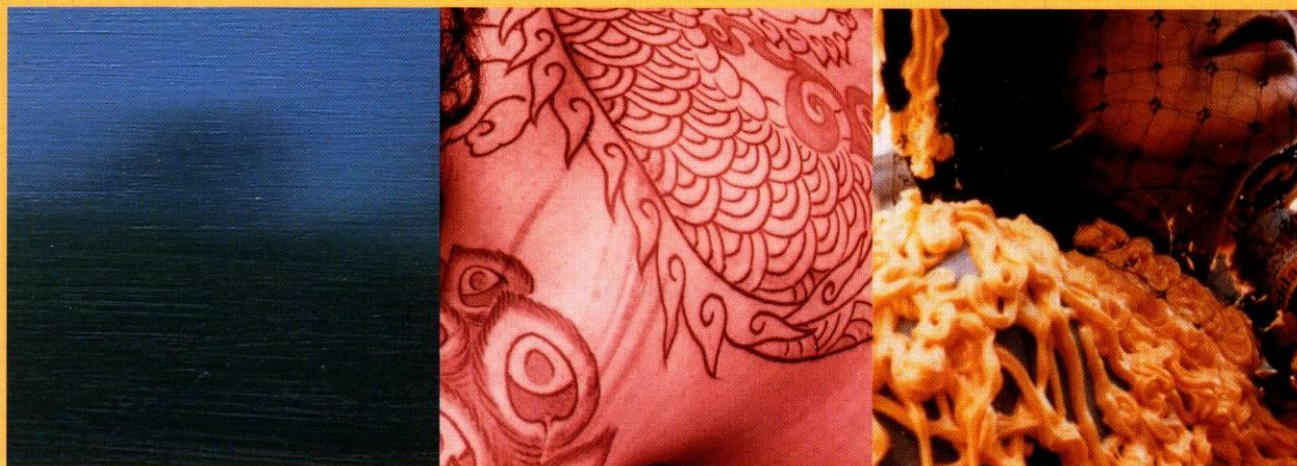
**BODY
LANGUAGE
WOMEN'S
PERFORMANCE
ART AND SEX**

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Lasker print**
see page 72

ISSUE
27

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cover

COSIMO CAVALLARO, *Fashion
Icon Twiggy, 1999*, cheese perfor-
mance at the Downtown Arts
Festival, New York. Courtesy: the
artist. Photographer: Marc
Higashino



Laura Owens

by Mark Godfrey

Pressed up against the two edges of a large wall at Sadie Coles, the canvases of Laura Owens' untitled diptych depict two monkeys. Their tails and hands are wrapped around branches, from which sprout large leaves of pale green and turquoise. Separated by an expanse of bare wall, the monkeys exchanged smiles and stares, and appeared to want to grasp each other rather than the trees. That is, until the spectators realised it was they who had constructed the relationship. The creatures, of course, did not actually see each other – it was the viewer who filled in the empty space between them with an Attenborough-esque narrative. When this became clear, connections between the two paintings seemed suddenly less secure.

The great success of the installation of this diptych was in creating so much real space for confusion. The gap between the canvases was expanded by an even more perplexing space between the diptych and another untitled painting opposite. This square canvas seems entirely abstract. Its surface is covered by different markings and paints. Some areas have been dyed with thinned acrylic; others are covered with sprayed paint. There are thick, pasty collections of oil and thin lines and swirls of piped black. These juxtapositions create a surface which is forcefully material, its three-dimensionality emphasised by piped lines that bend around the stretcher. Yet, looking at this painting, it is sometimes hard to tell just where some of the material *is*. Though the oil and piped paint sit resolutely on top of the surface, and the dyed acrylic *in* the canvas fibre, the sprayed paint occupies an indeterminate location, seeming to hover away from the surface, neither below nor

beneath it. The ease that arose from our ability to position the other parts of the painting is disturbed, and further troubled when some surface marks begin to appear as so many features of a sky: suddenly an arc of oil becomes a rainbow, a spiral of spray an aeroplane trail, and a 'V' of black piping a bird in flight.

This idea of confusion returns us to the space between the diptych and this painting. How could we make sense of the jarring, the wilful incoherence of figuration and abstraction *between* works as well as *in* one work? One could set these works within a tradition of art-historical parody. The diptych, made by Helen Frankenthaler's process of dying the canvas fibre, could be said to subvert the orthodox modernism of post-painterly abstraction with cheeky (monkey) representation. And the untitled painting might play painterly marks against each other, holding various moments of American art history (De Kooning's oils, Morris Louis' dyes, Olitski's sprays) in suspension for the sake of gaming itself.

But though this reading cannot be dismissed, it does not do justice to the atmosphere of the work. If Owens looks back to Frankenthaler it is with a smile rather than a sneer. The work exudes a relaxed humour rather than a smug sarcasm. This sense of amused ease is also present in the drawings, which revisit the modernist languages of collages and grids. In one, two weaves of pink and orange paper are pasted onto a surface; at their edges, similarly coloured crayon marks swerve away, as if the paper, bored of its arrangement, broke free from the rigidity. In another, green crayon grid-lines are interrupted at interstices by dashes of autumnal watercolours, though it is hard to tell whether the monotony of lines forced the paint dabs or whether the chaos of dabs needed the tempering order of lines. The charming drawings, like the rest of the work, provide a space for guesswork and enchantment.

Laura Owens was at Sadie Coles HQ, London, 28 October – 30 November

above: LAURA OWENS, *Untitled*, 1999, acrylic and ink on canvas, 152 x 152 cm. Courtesy: Sadie Coles, London

below: LAURA OWENS, *Untitled*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, diptych, 152.5 x 310 cm. Courtesy: Sadie Coles, London



above: M...
Turkish...
canvas...
Courtes...
Antwerp...
right: M...
X-posur...
canvas...
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collectio...