

HD Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden - Around the Scottish galleries - Exhibition - Arts.

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LP THE American artist Laura Owens has had a number of shows in London and the US recently and was included in Young Americans Two at the Saatchi Gallery. The mention of Saatchi in connection with any artist can send out mixed signals: inevitably it will mean increased, if temporary, marketability as the work (and the artist) is subsumed by the hype of the international art market. One is therefore cautious in approaching the work of someone touted as the latest word in contemporary art.

There is an immediate problem with Owens' work. On the surface it consists of what appear to be naive representations of landscape, boats and animals. The colours are pleasing and the motifs, joyful and - apparently - simple.

TD Owens describes her work as having "a straightforward, Midwestern, no-bones-about-it sensibility and a certain sense of humour". Perhaps by "humour", she actually means irony, because it is impossible to view these works without feeling that they are laden with copious amounts of self-referential irony. They are also, it would seem, paintings that are highly aware of an art historical lineage. Does this make Owens a cynic, for all her protestations about wishing to paint joyful, uncomplicated works? It is difficult to know. And it is also hard to see what is actually there, apart from a certain cleverness, once the hype has been removed.

The show has been conceived as a direct response to a collection of botanical teaching diagrams commissioned by John Balfour (1808-1884), who was Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden from 1845 to 1879. These paintings are in themselves fascinating, not for the quality of the work, which seems amateurish and clumsy, but as historical documents. However, it is difficult to see how these images interconnect with Owens' work, beyond the fact that the latter represent certain generic botanical phenomena, such as trees and plants. The engagement seems weak and unconvincing, given the potential for a more elaborate response.

Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (0131 248 2983), until July 30

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