

Laura Owens
LOUISE FARR
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She has been lauded--and trashed--for her enormous, cartoon-like landscapes and abstracts.

At a recent opening at Los Angeles' quirky little China Art Objects gallery--the nucleus of the city's emerging Chinatown art scene--painter Laura Owens spent most of the evening playing cards in the basement.

The show, a collaboration with her friend Scott Reeder, was titled "Heaven and Hell." On the gallery's upper two levels, the pair painted one oversized canvas and a series of smaller ones depicting cartoonish birds, a tree and falling leaves in retro decorator colors against white. Below ground, in a claustrophobic space that had been daubed an infernal red, a canvas showed the dark, twisted roots of the upstairs tree. Nearby, a dealer (a symbolic stand-in for an art dealer, perhaps) slapped cards on a felt-topped table, while gallery patrons gambled with real chips.

Maybe this was just an amusing take on L.A.'s current high-stakes art scene. Yet it was surely no accident that Owens, 29, one of the most watched, praised--and sniped at--artists to emerge in the last few years, placed herself in the center of a hellish gambling den. This at a point when, to most struggling artists, she would appear to be in heaven.

"Logically, I can see what it would look like from the outside," says Owens, whose work is already in the collections of the Guggenheim and the L.A. County Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art. "But if you really had to walk the walk, it's not that pretty. It's hard to make paintings--and definitely hard to make a painting when a lot of people are looking at you."

They've been looking since she graduated from California Institute of the Arts in 1994. "I wasn't one of the cool kids," explains Owens, who grew up in Euclid, Ohio. "The cool kids were always adhering to some of the practices of the teachers--or they were in bands. I felt kind of geeky or something. Like people didn't take seriously what I was painting."

But after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, when students were working out of makeshift studios, she blossomed. She'd been letting her ideas out in bits and pieces until the life-threatening situation shook her into expressing them on much larger canvases than before. By the following year, she found herself in group shows in Los Angeles, New York and Paris and solo at Santa Monica's Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

At first, critics viewed her enormous abstracts and landscapes--with their patches of bare canvas, Magic Marker lines and squirts of oil paint--as ironic. But China Art Objects co-founder Giovanni Intra is reminded of Fantasia animation art and sees her work as sincere, not jokey. "The way she's taken this scale of painting--they're quite large--and matched it with the innocence of her paintings, produces a strange sensation. Which is really what they're about."

They're also, according to Paul Schimmel, chief curator of temporary Art at L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art, about a painting's architecture, an assessment Owens does not dispute. "Every painting is about how you make a painting," she says. "I'm always trying to reinvent the whole idea every time."

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