

SE Arts

HD LAURA OWENS BRINGS ZEN TO HER BOLD ART

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LP When Laura Owens installed her new paintings at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, she insisted on leaving one wall of the gallery blank. It made some of the museum staff uneasy - this was not the manner in which they were accustomed to hanging paintings.

But Owens, who had spent a month as the Gardner's artist-in-residence in the spring of 2000, creates a rhythm in her paintings that leads her viewer into mystery. Her installation echoes and reinforces that rhythm. The empty wall functions as breathing room, a place to return to the self before launching into an occasionally rollicking, now-and-then reflective dialogue with her works.

TD Owens doesn't merely paint. She collages fabric onto her paintings. While she was at the Gardner, she spent a lot of time with textiles in the museum's collection, and she visited the textile conservation lab. Two 18th-century Chinese tapestries that inspired her hang just outside the gallery: They're stitched with symbols of good fortune, like a phoenix rising, flowers, elephants, and bats, which in China represent happiness.

Bats flit through many of Owens's paintings, as do flowers. The largest painting in the show - hanging just around the corner from the blank wall - shows a monkey in spectacles hanging from a branch. She's a blob of black with curling tail and arms. Above, the canvas is watery blue speckled with bits of fabric, like blossoms set flying from the tree. Below, spindly plants surround a beaver gazing up at the monkey.

This piece (they are all untitled) feels a little bit like "Curious George Drops Acid." The artist creates paintings that could be hallucinations, with shifting perspectives and bright colors, and with suggestions of deeper knowledge hidden in the flowers.

Reinforcing Owens's rhythm of reflection followed by inspiration, the next painting is quieter: a nocturne, soaked in blue-black. On the bottom you can see utility poles connected by thick, shining strings of paint. Above, bats hover in the night. This painting is nearly as inward as the blank wall, but with suggestions of power and life coursing through the darkness.

Owens then follows up her night with day: a trio of small paintings, junglelike landscapes abundant with plants, again soaked with blots of inky paint, busy with color and growth and pollination. In a painting featuring sunflowers, she collages white fabric flowers on the canvas. Beneath, we see a photograph of a painting of more flowers. Then there are Owens's own painted elements: a backwash of green, loamy earth at the bottom. This piece shuttles among floral fictions, none more real than the next.

After such intensity, the next painting - based on a tapestry from the Gardner's Raphael Room - provides more breathing room. Owens recreates much of the imagery from the textile: flowers circling the edges;

hovering doves; a crowning blossom. But the center, which in the original features a pair of lovebirds, here is blank. The open space feels intended for the viewer to reflect and meditate.

Owens's approach is zenlike. In Shunryu Suzuki's classic "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," there's one point where you turn the page, and there's nothing on the next one but a drawing of a fly. It stops the expected flow; it's so unexpected, it flushes the mind of concentration and leaves you refreshed and delighted. The point would be to take what comes, and always return to the self, because it is always new.

The world is real, she suggests, and the world is an illusion of our own making. The more opportunity we have to reflect upon and recognize the illusion, and move on to the next one, the more deeply we engage in life. Owens's paintings - and her installation at the Gardner - represent that process.

RF Art Review Laura Owens: New Works At: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, through Sept. 16

ART Caption: An untitled watercolor, pencil, and collage on paper, by Laura Owens, now at the Gardner Museum.

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