

REVIEWS

was far more fashionable than Freudlich's intimidating primitivism and oddly anguished abstraction, which convey his sense of the bizarre nature, not to say absurdity, of the New Man.

—Donald Kuspit

BOSTON

LAURA OWENS
ISABELLA STEWART
GARDNER MUSEUM

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, where Laura Owens spent a month in residence in the spring of 2000, provided the ideal site for the Los Angeles-based artist's first solo museum show: Owens's clever and oddball mixing of styles and vocabularies is a perfect match for the eclecticism of Mrs. Gardner's Fenway Court. Owens, who is known for her paintings and collages characterized by their quirky levity and kitschy twists on everything from high art to "women's work," once again offered up an idiosyncratic balance of stylistic elusiveness and retro sweetness. Many of the nine paintings and drawings here were inspired by works in the museum's extensive collection—a Japanese kimono, a Chinese tapestry, a small drawing by fifteenth-century Italian master Filippino Lippi—as well as by the celebrated hothouse tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils that grace its inner court. With their groovy flowers, bats, bees, and spiderwebs (Owens's signatures) layered in the abstract space of neo-geo, *Color Field*, and pattern painting, the works also evince a mod-ish '60s sensibility.

The most ambitious (and endearing) image was a large collage and painting on canvas featuring a spider monkey swinging from a branch as a baby monkey hangs on (all works *Untitled*, 2001). The curvy, lushly painted tree is rooted in a quiltlike patchwork hillside. Flatly rendered arcs of pale yellow, green, and blue, deliberately parodying Kenneth Noland's targets, rise behind the tree like a rainbow. Here Owens explores a full range of textures in the collaged elements and the paint itself: The monkeys' black fur is soak-stained into the canvas like ink into paper, while a spiderweb in the tree and flower petals among the undergrowth below are composed of impastoed daubs of paint. This simian subject, borrowed from an antique Chinese painting, has appeared in Owens's work since 1997, but an absurdist element has been added:



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2001, oil and acrylic on canvas, 46 x 54\"/>

Thick black construction-paper spectacles cover the adult monkey's felt eyes. In the lower left corner of the painting, a thinly painted mauve badger (lifted from a nineteenth-century Japanese silk kimono) looks up from a grassy marsh at a full moon behind the monkeys. Owens choreographs the spatial flow of the composition via the animals' gazes: The badger looks up at the monkeys, the baby smiles down at the badger, and the adult peers at something outside the frame.

Tenderness has long been a central theme in Owens's oeuvre. In a small work on paper, she puts a spin on a 1504 Filippino Lippi drawing by situating Christ and St. John the Baptist in a fantasy garden; their devotional love is reflected in giant flowers that sprout around them. As in the prototype, the figure of Christ is rendered as effeminate and waiflike, which Owens emphasizes by placing a floral bracelet on his right wrist. The gaze exchanged by the sacred figures is the composition's focal point; they could be mistaken for lovers.

In another small study of work in the Gardner's collection, Owens translates an intricately embroidered seventeenth-century textile into a festooned watercolor on paper with brushstrokes imitating stitches. The painter, an erstwhile cross-stitcher, re-creates in dainty brushstrokes the ceremonial silk cloth embroidered with polychrome yarns; she heightens the color and omits the crown and two-headed eagle of the original in favor of an open central space. Elsewhere she cuts and pastes intricate patterns into paper and layers her work like appliqué. These strategies are all part of the aesthetic twist



Jim Waters, *Untitled, Blue*, 2001, acrylic and glitter on panel, 12 x 11 x 2\"/>

Owens puts on gender stereotypes long associated with sewing.

—Francine Koslow Miller

ATLANTA

JIM WATERS
KIANG GALLERY

Jim Waters paints in series: Each group of works on shaped panels explores a single form, such as a star burst. In this case, all the panels are shaped like the letter O, in many colors and sizes but always in the same font (narrower on the top and bottom). The front and sides of each O are generally painted in a single color mixed with glitter, while the back is coated with a contrasting color. The repetition of the scheme makes slight variations rather dramatic, as when the painted outer rim of a work provides a flat counterpart to the glitter on its front. The paintings are mounted a few inches from the wall, allowing the color on the back to reflect a kind of ghost O on the white surface.

Waters's practice of painting the backs of his panels is part of a layered inquiry into the nature of paintings as objects. The reflected colors on the wall remind us that paintings have backs; the picture plane may be flat, but paintings themselves are three-dimensional objects. Set off from the wall, Waters's Os also cast shadows, yielding a third optical presence. The glitter on the front of each panel enters into the game, too: Both the paintings and the walls behind them are surfaces for the play of bouncing light. In

most cases, the reflected color seems like an afterimage, an ethereal supplement to the object hovering on the wall. Because of their ringlike shape, the paintings also function as framing devices for these afterimages and shadows. And occasionally the reflected hue is more saturated than the color on the painting's surface; in those cases the color on the wall comes to be the main image while the painting itself seems to be there primarily to generate that image—it becomes more of a frame than an image, more pretext than text.

Two freestanding pieces widened the dialogue between painting and object to include sculpture. *Untitled, Green* (all works 2001), with its glittery light green exterior and pink inner rim, is like a cross between a watermelon slice and a Fabergé egg. At three inches thick, the piece is wide enough to be displayed upright on a pedestal. Waters seems to suggest here that the difference between a painting and a sculpture comes down to little more than the question of whether the object can stand on its own. *Untitled, Rust*, the most overtly ironic piece in the show, is a standing O four feet in diameter, whose outer surface is painted to look just like the patina on a Serra sculpture, though its sparkling inner rim gives it away. Monumental in its own fashion, *Untitled, Rust* is also an effective parody of Minimalist machismo.

Although Waters's investigations of the formal aspects of painting and the conditions that contribute to an object's identity as painting or sculpture align his sensibility with sober Minimalist and Conceptualist concerns, he eschews austerity in favor of humor and play, especially in his use of



Carla Arocha, *Underground*, 2001, latex, wood, mirrors, and velvet, 15' x 20' x 17\"/>

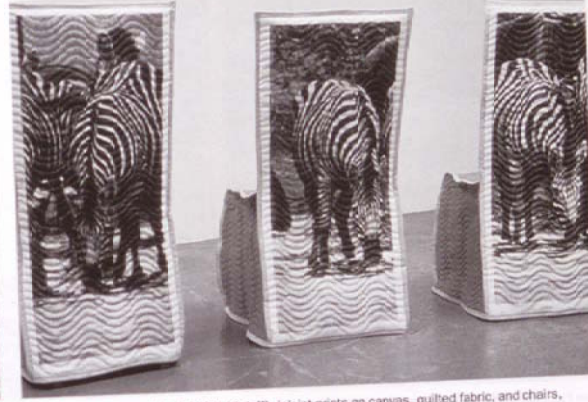
color and glitter. The repetition of the familiar typographic form in a variety of presentations makes it possible to see it as an abstraction and draws attention to formal issues. But Waters also makes room for muted but sly cultural commentary. The afterimages on the walls give some of the pieces the feel of letters from a neon sign that have struck out on their own; one large blue oval strongly evokes the CBS eye logo. Without sacrificing the formal rigor of his work, Waters reminds us that typographic design and branding are central constituents of our commercialized cultural landscape.

—Philip Auslander

CHICAGO

CARLA AROCHA
MONIQUE MELOCHE

The threat of terrorism and the fear that follows a terrorist attack reduce "normalcy" to a veneer of routine that only imperfectly masks our vulnerabilities and anxieties. On March 20, 1995, several teams of Aum Shinrikyo sect members released aqueous solutions containing highly toxic sarin gas in five Tokyo subway lines during morning rush hour. Twelve commuters died, and more than five thousand were injured; among the effects of sarin is impaired vision, a literal abrading of the eye. The works in Carla Arocha's exhibition "Underground"—which opened a few days before September 11—allude to the disorientation suffered by the victims of this assault as well as the fear that persists in its aftermath.



Helen Altman, *Stand*, 2001 (detail), ink-jet prints on canvas, quilted fabric, and chairs, overall dimensions 5' 2\"/>

(Haruki Murakami's recent book *Underground*, comprising interviews with casualties of the Tokyo attack as well as interviews with Aum Shinrikyo members, provided the exhibition title.)

The centerpiece was *Underground* (all works 2001), a large platform constructed fifteen inches above the floor, with thirty-nine mirrors in various sizes arranged on top. On a wall next to the platform was stretched a large sheet of black velvet. *Underground* functioned as a disrupted reflecting pool, the immediacy and accuracy of the mirror image undercut by the cacophonous proliferation of piecemeal information these mirrors provided. Depending on where the viewer stood, disconnected shards of black velvet, timber ceiling, brickwork, pristine white wall, and bright light appeared simultaneously. Sight became fragmented, undependable, confusing, analogous to the hallucinatory experience described by many of the sarin victims, whose optical breakdown was paralleled by the similarly disjunctive experience of surviving a terrorist attack.

Across the gallery, two smallish black circles appeared at about eye level among the vertical light blue stripes of the painting *In the Dark*. Victim after victim in Murakami's book describes pupil contraction, loss of visual focus, and double and impaired vision, in some cases followed by permanent blindness. Arocha's painted black circles become projections of dysfunctional sight, holes metaphorically punched through the grid of modern abstract painting. Nearby, *Umbrella*, 2001, a pair of transparencies on mirrored glass, shows the inside of two open umbrellas, one light green, the other pink. The bright

colors and the star pattern of the metal ribs, looking almost like the petals of a flower, are lively and upbeat. The pointed end of an umbrella, though, was what the Aum Shinrikyo terrorists used to pierce the sealed bags of water and sarin in the subway. That the trigger for this event was such a benign, generic object—now with permanently altered associations in Japan—is central to Arocha's consideration of the flimsy and fickle nature of visual signs.

—James Yood

DALLAS

HELEN ALTMAN
DUNN AND BROWN
CONTEMPORARY

Helen Altman's recent show "My Best Eggs" included fifteen "torch" drawings of animals ranging from pandas and lions to sad-sack dogs and mules. Her technique, developed several years ago, involves scorching marks into water-soaked paper with a propane torch, like toasting the sugar crust of a crème brûlée. It is an unforgiving way to work: The drawings must be finished quickly, before the paper dries and ignites. Erasures and touch-ups are impossible. Yet Altman manages to produce lush chiaroscuro renderings this way. The warm ochers and deep burnt siennas of the toasted paper play off the white ground that remains around the figure, uncannily asserting the subjects' untamed spontaneity with surprising realism. But beyond that, she conjures a tone of utter vulnerability in the way the

isolated creatures float in the contextless space of the paper.

Along with her drawings, Altman exhibited six ink-jet prints on canvas stretched by quilted blankets like those used by moving companies. She has painted directly on such blankets in the past, capitalizing on the ideas of rootlessness and leaving home they imply, but these recent pieces were more cleanly designed and elegant than the earlier work. The digital prints here each derived from a secondhand image of some "natural" subject—a storm at sea, an evergreen tree, a forest fire—whose multiple layers of reproduction highlighted its remove from nature. In *Colorado Blue Spruce*, 2001, a color copy of the eponymous tree complete with a caption indicating that it is "frequent in cultivation" is centered on a quilted fabric field commercially printed with '70s-style blue and green flowers. The manifold layers of nonnatural references (banal cartoon blossoms, domesticated plant species) and materials (synthetic ink, false colors, digitally reproduced and mass-produced imagery) overwhelm all pretense of connecting to nature. Like blankets, the conceptual systems that make such images necessary insulate us from the material reality of nature.

Stand, 2001, eight quilt-covered dining-room chairs bearing a fragmented ink-jet mural of zebras at a watering hole, imported this idea into a more clearly domestic situation. The images appear only on the backs of the chairs, so that one must turn away from them to be seated. (Hence the title, at least in part.) The animals' protective patterning was echoed in several of the ink-jet paintings that incorporate commercially printed camouflage. For Altman the adaptation of generic vegetation imagery on clothing for soldiers and hunters is yet another culturally loaded example of human imitation of nature, like flower patterns and illustrations from a bestiary. She activates these elements with a collagist's wit reminiscent of Rauschenberg.

"Nature," wrote Raymond Williams in his cultural lexicon *Keywords*, "is perhaps the most complex word in the language." For a social critic like Williams, nature always remained a cultural concept. For Altman, the word holds a set of extrasocial references that, as limited by human incursions as they surely are, live on in cultural expressions as diverse as Kmart fabric patterns, suburban lawns, and nature guides.

—Michael Odum

