



Cavepainting

BY DOUG HARVEY

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The first American era of self-consciously “bad” painting started in the late '70s, when disgruntled painters, aware that the cultural transformation promised by their crabby tenured purist father figures wasn't playing out as written, lashed back by deliberately putting their considerable formalist chops in the service of everything they'd previously learned to scorn. Not surprisingly, they enjoyed enormous popular and, with the increased cash flow of the Reagan Years, commercial success. When the '80s art market crashed, most were swept under the carpet in a brief flurry of Puritanism. But the economy's unexpectedly fast recovery in the '90s sent dealers, curators and collectors scurrying to find a new batch of marketable picture-makers to fill the void. While this next generation was touted as some kind of pure-painting revival, its most successful practitioners worked the same gray area of questionable taste that had paid off for Schnabel and Salle.

How much and where this second era differs from the first is evidenced in the self-curated three-person exhibit “Cavepainting,” which opened this month with some fanfare at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. The show's local draw is Laura Owens, certainly the most successful young female artist from L.A. in the last decade, while Chris Ofili's *succes de scandale* paintings incorporating elephant poop have won him England's Turner Prize and made him something of a household name. Less well-known hereabouts is Scottish-Canadian-English painter Peter Doig, who was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in the early '90s. Each has contributed three canvases of various sizes and quality: Owens, one of her felt-leaf Twomblys, a small formulaic field of shrubbery, and a larger, more complex landscape; Doig, three of his trademark images of acid-tinged narcissistic isolation; and Ofili, a surprising group of dizzying Rasta-hued pointillist images that cry out for a bong hit.

So what is the point of this show, apart from handing over an enormous, high-profile L.A. nonprofit space to Gavin Brown's Enterprise, the New York gallery that represents all three participants? The press material suggests that letting the artists pick the work to be shown “embodies the Museum's commitment to providing a laboratory for experimentation and collaboration.” Let's see -- nine paintings, three large canvases by each artist, distributed in

utterly conventional gallery style across seven big walls. Whoa, settle down there, you crazy kids! Maybe you should work to change the system from within! In a catalog-reprinted e-mail exchange with all three painters (which for some reason I can't keep from imagining as a sock-puppet show), critic Lane Relyea floats the revisionist notion that all the painters in the '60s believed they agreed with one another about what they were doing, but nowadays they agree that this was incorrect. Essayist Jonathan Jones makes the claim that the common revolutionary thread here is that these three upstart painters, unlike Jackson Pollock, spend time in the studio. It's about time someone had the courage to say, "Go to hell, Jackson Pollock!"

Quite apart from the fact that Mr. Pollock probably spent more studio time on a single drip painting than Ms. Owens has on her entire oeuvre, the exhibit does have a coherence of sorts as an illustration of how mediocre painting has been routinely elevated to a position of cultural centrality. Owens and Doig (and to a lesser extent Ofili) share a dependence on the enforced visual illiteracy of several generations of academically trained art professionals to make their work plausible. Like the school days of my southpaw mother, who had her good hand tied behind her back, or Native American children who were beaten for speaking their own languages, the most rudimentary knowledge of visual communication has been expunged from many of the most dominant art-school curricula in favor of more easily policed post hoc verbal rationalizations. So we have a situation where a Laura Owens can be anointed in the marketplace as an important and accomplished painter five minutes out of CalArts, with only a handful of clumsy anti-paintings to back it up, as writers and curators scramble to validate the designation and hundreds of bewildered grown-up painters wonder if, gee, maybe they should dust off their Fundamentals of Drawing exercises and blow them up onto canvases.

Most of the art public accepts deadpan assertions that Owens' work displays originality, competent (or even gifted) paint handling, and innovative transgressions of the boundary between viewer and art object, between the art object and architecture, because they've never been exposed to actual examples of these qualities. Critical newspeak identifies retro pastiches of '60s formalism as "technical innovation," wonky illusionism as "immersive environments," irony as "not ironic" and cynicism as "not cynical." I suppose Owens, as an ambitious career artist, can't be blamed for coasting this slippery slope of plausible deniability to fame and fortune -- she has apparently never left the authoritarian womb of homeschoolart world, having gotten her MFA at 25 and entered straight into stardom. No wonder her work is so charmingly devoid of content: There's nothing to be held back. That said, she is getting better. The one serious work in "Cavepainting," a large landscape lifted from a Japanese scroll, populated by unconvincingly silly monkeys and bunnies, seems ambitious even to my undiminished expectations, with a groovy patch of wood grain and a few stray trompe l'oeil playing cards suggesting the artist may be engaging with the legacy of synthetic cubism.

Where Owens' work was clearly earmarked because of its dissimilarity to its immediate forebears, Peter Doig's is dyed-in-the-wool 1980s bad painting, having been exhibited as early

as 1982 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The thought that Doig's painting may also have improved is a frightening one, as the works for which he has become known over the last decade resemble atrocities abandoned in the stacks of undergraduate painting studios every spring -- dank, lumpy translations of projected photographs, compositionally retarded and indifferently painted, with the bottom of the canvas invariably left dangling in a washy void. He might as well cut the lower third clean off -- at least his paintings would have an interesting shape. Unlike Owens, who may well not be able to discern the difference, Doig is clearly engaged in the same willful incompetence that motivated so many '80s painters. But while Doig may be goaded by a generational animosity toward the institutionalized international style of post-painterly transcendentalism that gave '80s Bad its frisson of urgency, his work has made it to the Santa Monica Museum thanks to the same enforced aesthetic that has landed Owens teaching jobs. This is another discontinuity in the marketing and reception of recent bad painting -- between the historical edge attributed to these slight, stale cartoons and the fact that the instructors under whose gaze they were painted (not to mention the collectors, writers and curators at whom they were directed) are already a generation removed from the disdained Modernist cosmology. Far from usurping any current preconceptions about painting, '90s Bad children played fawning court jesters to the entrenched authorities, ridiculing the previous regime -- their aesthetic grandparents, whose work they knew only in the form of a condescending shorthand.

Chris Ofili's work at least is obviously sincere. It resembles nothing so much as the obsessive psychedoodlings of generations of high school pothead artists, which is fine -- reveling in optical reverie is certainly a more valid excuse for making art than some self-loathing in-joke. The art world hasn't allowed entry to a lot of this kind of work, except through the authorially ambiguous quotation of artists like Jim Shaw, so it's nice that Ofili gets to show so much. Nevertheless, the upper-middle-class hedonism of his work combined with the conspicuous borrowings from indigenous African art makes his inclusion in the Saatchi juggernaut reek of calculated tokenism. Less cold-blooded but perhaps more exploitative is his elevation as First Amendment martyr at the hands of former NYC Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, whose crusade against the Brooklyn Museum over Ofili's elephant-poop-'n'-BVM painting in the "Sensation" show was almost as crass and stupid as his attempt to use the 9/11 tragedy as a springboard for a third term. But Ofili, out of the "Cavepainting" lot, is clearly having the best time. In the sock-puppet e-mail roundtable he responds to Relyea's self-important prattling with inscrutable aphorisms and chipper affirmations, and nobody makes paintings like his to try to get famous. Of the three, his work has the potential of rising to the hype, because he's actually doing what he wants.

With the recent, shall we say, "dip" in the art market, perpetually moribund painting will undoubtedly be relegated to the catacombs once again. Peter Doig will fit right in. For Laura Owens, it could be a blessing, as the riot grrrl art brat thing wears a little thin after 30, and the tenability of poorly executed Modernist painting as a comment on anything has been stretched

too far to snap back another time. Painting's next resuscitation will have to be more substantially engaged with the contemporary visual landscape, and some time out of the poisonous premature limelight could do a lot of artists good.

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