

“MATTHEW BARNEY: THE CREMASTER CYCLE”

SOLOMON R.
GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM,
NEW YORK

TIM GRIFFIN

Dark Polaris snowmobiles stand dormant in a row, their cinematic image dissolving slowly into crags of glacial ice, so that shimmering silver logos are superimposed, for a moment, on a sublime landscape—as if all of nature’s territories were somehow tamed, enveloped, *swallowed whole* by the crystalline lettering. This kind of poetic abstraction appears regularly in advertising but, showing up in Matthew Barney’s *CREMASTER 2*, 1999, becomes all the more evocative for its artistic implications. In the stylized execution of Gary Gilmore that precedes it, Barney restages the legislated death as a final, ritualistic rodeo ride, suggesting that something more is at stake than any single killer’s demise. Solitary horsemen cross the surrounding salt flats at twilight, seeming to riff on Richard Prince’s Marlboro Men; and the horseshoe-shaped arena housing the choreographed death scene, while evoking the Land art of yesteryear in both scale and location, literally bears the bold insignia of the *CREMASTER* cycle, 1994–2002. Everything mythic from the past—whether earth or the raw materials of art—seems already contained, *re-presented*, in media. And if Barney implicates himself by playing the protagonist (and he nearly always plays the



Above: Matthew Barney, *CREMASTER 2* (detail), 1999, still from a color video, 79 minutes. Production: Peter Strietmann. Bottom: Matthew Barney, *The Cabinet of the Man in Black*, 1999, nylon, acrylic, bridal satin, beaver felt, beeswax, petroleum jelly, and Billboard magazine, 39 1/2 x 47 1/2 x 37 1/2”.

protagonist), then one has to think: This death of the outlaw cowboy is, at the same time, the death of the outlaw artist.

By definition, the outlaw operates outside the law. (Out of the past, one stereotypical male outlaw is Robert Smithson, who died after soaring above those same salt flats.) This is not the case with Barney, who has more in common with the subject of Norman Mailer’s monologue in *CREMASTER 2*: “Within metamorphosis, Houdini becomes part of the cage that contains him. . . . He digests the lock; it becomes a part of him.” It is, to use the words of Barney’s Baby Fay La Foe, to whom Mailer is responding, a matter of *transcendence*—a transcendence that, to audiences visiting

Barney’s Guggenheim exhibition, should mirror the popular metamorphosis of the term *brand* from hot iron pressed on flesh to cool media impressed on minds. After all, consuming (or subsuming) the framing device has been a motif for Barney throughout his career. Anyone ascending the museum’s ramp encounters soft vitrines (they seem cast from Vaseline) containing, say, relics

of outlaws past—*The Cabinet of the Man in Black*, 1999, includes a Fred Biletnikoff Raiders jersey and a magazine ad for Johnny Cash—amid numerous signs reading PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH THE DISPLAY CASES. THEY ARE PART OF THE SCULPTURES. (Sometimes mechanisms of control are the best arbiters of meaning.) The *CREMASTER* exhibition is Barney’s most ambitious *metamorphosis* yet—his attempt (with the law on his side) to swallow the Guggenheim whole, making the museological “cage” into his own coiled digestive tract, turning the architecture and institution into one more element within his body of work. The site is specific: The ’90s artist should appear in the museum of the ’90s—the one that mainlined that decade’s model of corporate branding and globalization and echoed the corporate idea of total control and continuous expansion of identity. And so the museum bears all the markings of a branded environment, with flat screens dispersed about the space and Barney’s cult of self embedded in his trademark neon-blue AstroTurf that carpets the lobby floor.

Barney’s metaphorical “chains,” in other words, are also those of chain stores. Consider him a boy in the bubble economy: While his luxurious, vacuum-sealed films matched the opulent air of late-’90s boom culture, Barney also emulated the formal logic of that culture’s economy, merging his (jail) cell with a net-

work. (Indeed, for every hive, there is a honeycomb.) The *CREMASTER* series privileges modes of entrance and exit, holes in the floor, orifices, tubes, or windows that the camera approaches or passes through. In effect, images provide a system of portals; for example, beehives operate as imagistic, associative links between scenes. Barney’s editing technique then also enables the camera to move from macrocosmic to microcosmic scenario—from dancers on an open football field to grapes on the floor of a blimp’s claustrophobic cabin—and give them equal spatial value. It has the logic of a Web page, where images accrue the metaphors of space folded within space. And the divide between video image and physical object—or between cinema and art gallery or institution—is only one more editing cut, or “link” in the chain. In this light, the Guggenheim exhibition provides another neat culmination for Barney’s project: a kind of Cartesian pineal gland where concrete sculpture and architecture meet the abstractions of cinema and art history—and so a place where there is no way out but into the artist’s baroque narratives. (On this note, Barney should be considered a literary artist. He uses an almost medieval one-to-one language of signs in his work—which explains why his books and drawings tend to come off as the most remarkable pieces within his oeuvre. Visit *continued on page 191*



LAURA OWENS

MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES

HOWARD SINGERMAN

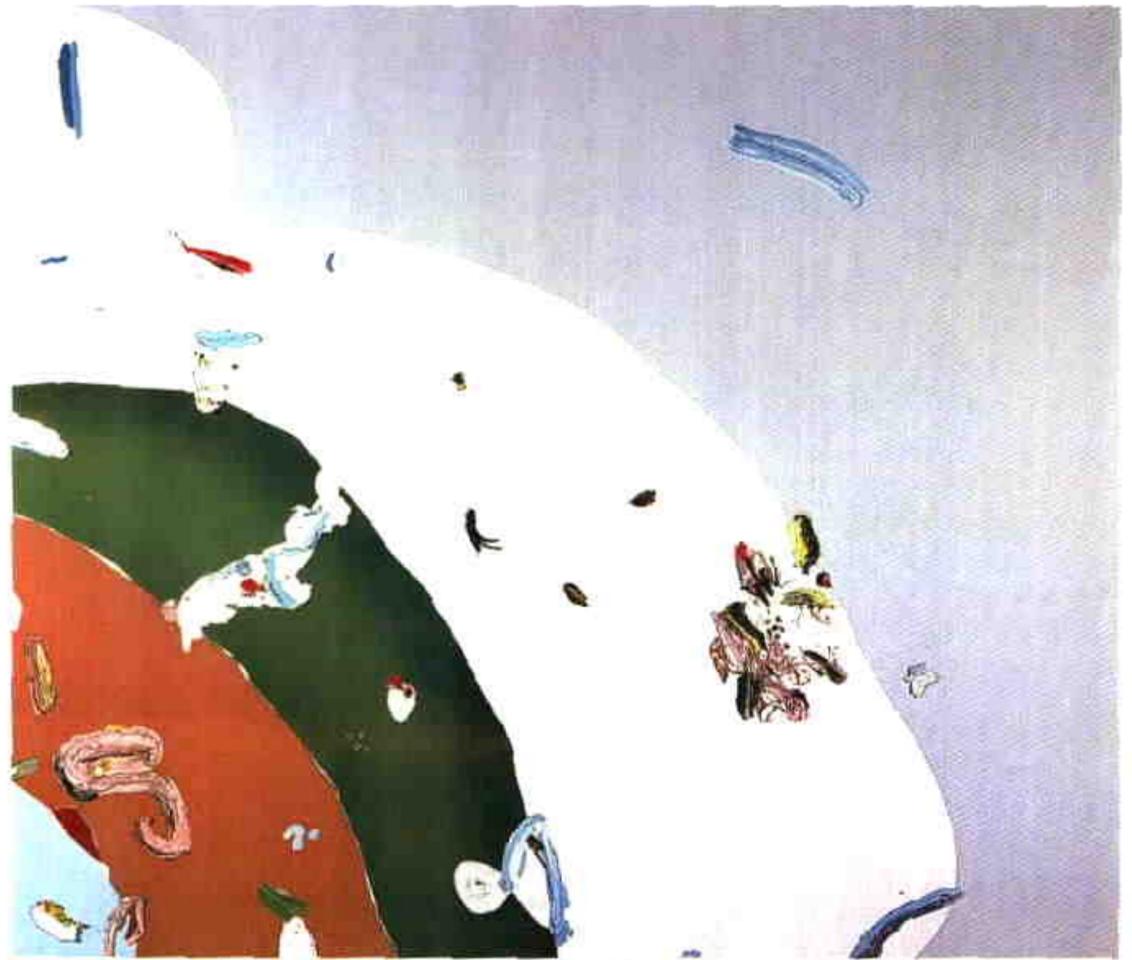
There are some very good paintings in MoCA's Laura Owens survey—particularly the large decorative landscapes painted between 1999 and 2002 that borrow from Chinese scroll and screen painting, the rococo pastorals of Beauvais tapestries, and the peaceable critterdom of children's-book illustration. Notable in their absence, though, are a couple of the artist's very strong early works that take pluralism in the museum and a modest and collaborative approach to painting as their relatively explicit subject. It's a way of working that continues to inform Owens's output and that has been an especially important model for a number of younger painters.

In his catalogue essay, curator Paul Schimmel takes one of those missing paintings, dated 1995, as an emblem for Owens's relationship to her sources and to painting's history. In it, a sloping beige floor rises to a narrow strip of museum wall, where some sixty paintings hang. Rendered in shorthand, they catalogue Owens's interests and influences, and their

salon-style hanging suggests a refusal of both a singular history and an emplotted present for painting. Certain of the depicted canvases are doubly authored; there are recognizable miniatures of Mondrian and Rothko, and even of this particular Owens. Others are multiply or anonymously so: Owens invited friends and family to paint their work into hers, opening up the painting and spreading its authorship still further.

The title of Schimmel's catalogue essay, "Plays Well with Others," points nicely to the stylistic and authorial openness of Owens's paintings and to the lightness with which they take their history. A phrase from grade-school report cards, the title also speaks, perhaps paternalistically, to Owens's youth; she is, at thirty-two, by a number of years the youngest painter MoCA has surveyed in such depth. Both Schimmel's essay and Thomas Lawson's contribution seem written partially in defense of the museum's choice. Lawson's text is fashioned around a series of "beginnings" and "attempts," both his and hers, and Schimmel proposes not only Owens's early work but student work in general as a model for her continuing approach, writing that her "reluctance to lay claim to a fixed position might at one time have been attributed to youth (certainly it is characteristic of much student work) but is now an integral aspect of Owens's methodology."

Owens's work moves easily from representation to abstraction—or maybe hovers between them—but then, so does most painting since the 1980s, and after Richter and Polke. Her work is marked neither by agon and the anxiety of influence nor by irony; nor does it lead back to a heightened subjectivity, either as self-assertion or lack. Owens's use of Frankenthaler and Olitski, a couple of familiar foils, is not a strategy to mark the death of painting, but a tactical approach to actually making one. Among the exhibition's strongest works is *Untitled*, 1998, in which nesting arcs of stained color lifted from early-'60s Olitski are dotted with swatches of impasto that seem to take the arcs as structural or even narrative space, reaching across them or hovering on their edges. Owens frequently plays the Olitskian trope of layering crusts of impasto against flat areas of color, but here, as elsewhere, she pulls the impasto



Above: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic and oil on canvas, 84 x 96".
Bottom: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2002–2003, acrylic and oil on canvas, 84 1/2 x 80".

DESPITE OWENS'S STUDIED IDIOSYNCRASY, HER PAINTINGS ARE RELATIVELY DETACHED AND EMOTIONALLY COOL; THAT'S PART OF THEIR OPENNESS.

away from the edge and toward a scene; it appears in the landscapes refigured as bits of botany or zoology.

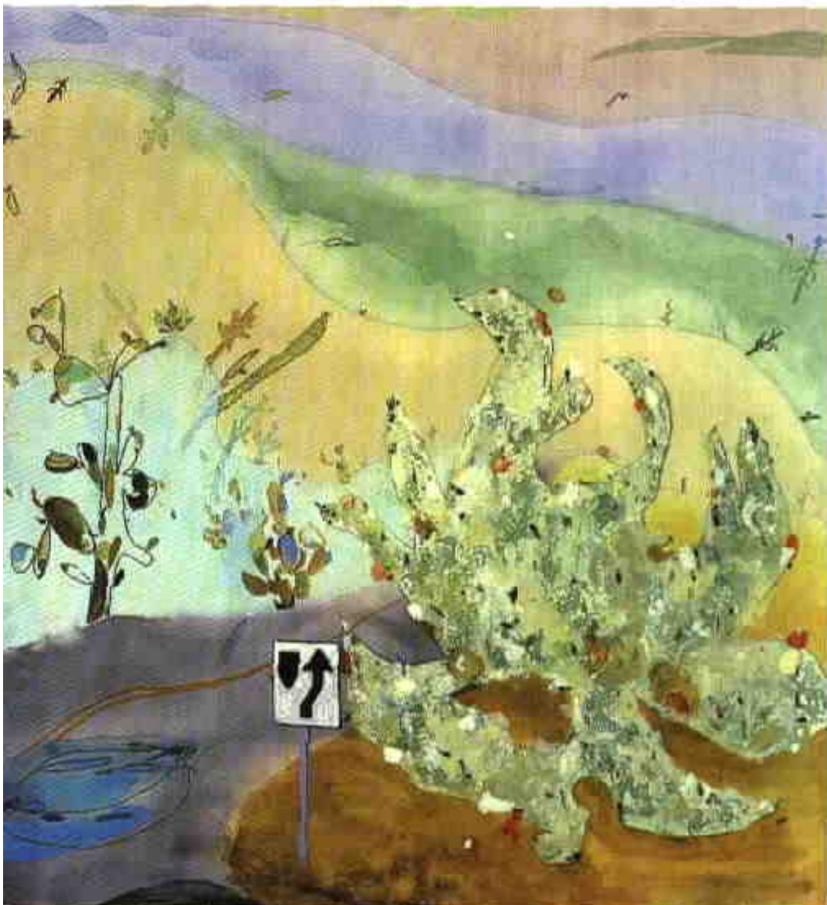
Despite Owens's studied idiosyncrasy, her paintings are relatively detached and emotionally cool; that's part of their openness. One of the ways they misstep is by offering protagonists in whom we might invest: the contemporary couple kissing, the girl on horseback under the stars. Her works function most effectively not as stories but as mise-en-scènes; the best are not built across a surface by juxtaposition or collage, but composed as tableaux. The question isn't one of abstraction versus representation necessarily, though a few of the least successful works are in fact large abstractions suffering from too much space or too little paint. Instead, it's closer to a choice between absorption and blankness, and about the demeanor a painting might have.

Most of the criticism Owens has received, good or bad, has invoked a con-

sistent list of attributes: lightness, openness, tenderness, innocence, vulnerability. These words describe by turns not only the paintings but Owens's attitude toward painting (and, perhaps, Owens herself, gendered and suggestive of youth as they are). The question of attitude has been a particularly important one for criticism and for painting recently, and maybe a critic's weak phenomenology is a way of getting at it. When it's no longer clear how to link one painting practice to another or how to summon a history of painting, the attitude a painter takes toward his or her practice (as *métier*, tradition, compendium, or catalogue) and the attitude a painting takes toward its being seen have particular importance. The visual and temporal permeability that Owens's paintings propose, the collaborative openness of both painting and painter, seems appropriate to the moment and to the question. And that very permeability raises a different question, a historical one posed to the museum about criteria and necessity, its stock-in-trade; Why this painting, rather than another? □

"Laura Owens" will be on view at MoCA, Los Angeles, through June 22; travels to the Aspen Art Museum, Aug. 2–Sept. 28; Milwaukee Art Museum, Oct. 18–Jan. 18, 2004; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, Mar. 4–May 9, 2004.

Howard Singerman is associate professor of art history at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.



DISPATCH

ARTFORUM

wmaalibrary | log out ADVERTISE BACK ISSUES CONTACT US SUBSCRIBE


 search

ARTGUIDE

IN PRINT

500 WORDS

PREVIEWS

BOOKFORUM

A & E

中文版

DIARY

PICKS

NEWS

VIDEO

FILM

PASSAGES

SLANT

Michael
Werner

links

David
Zwirner
New York
LondonGalerie
Buchholz

P·P·O·W

gallery
luisottiDAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERYAnton Kern
GalleryGLADSTONE
GALLERYhosfelt
galleryTHE
BOXAndrea
Rosen
GalleryGavin
Brown's
enterprise

IN PRINT



PURCHASE

ARCHIVE

September 2016

Summer 2016

May 2016

April 2016

March 2016

February 2016

January 2016

All back issues

Read
DISPATCHArtforum's
weekly news
digest

May 2003

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COLUMNS

PASSAGES

Chrissie Iles on [Jack Goldstein](#)

SLANT

Rhonda Lieberman on [Madonna](#)

FILM

Geoffrey O'Brien on [The Man Without a Past](#)

MUSIC

Matthew Higgs on [Throbbing Gristle](#)

TOP TEN

Guy Richards Smit

10-20-30-40

Years Ago in Artforum

PREVIEWS

REGIONAL EXHIBITIONS

40 shows worldwide

US NEWS

Carter Ratcliff on [John Elderfield](#)

TRAVEL BRIEF

Exhibitions on the road

VAULT

Thomas Crow on "[The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard](#)"

WORLD REPORT

Steven Henry Madoff on [the Venice Biennale](#)

FEATURES

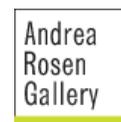
TELLING TALES: PHILIP
GUSTON IN RETROSPECT
David Anfam1000 WORDS: SIMON
STARLING
Tom VanderbiltFEAST FOR THE EYES: THE
ART OF RIVANE
NEUENSCHWANDER
Daniel BirnbaumPORTFOLIO: STEPHEN SHORE
Walead BeshtyLOUDER THAN WORDS: THE
FILMS OF JOHNNIE TO
David BordwellOPENINGS: URS FISCHER
Alison M. Gingeras

REVIEWS

Roberta Smith on "[Matthew Barney: The CREMASTER Cycle](#)"Tim Griffin on "[Matthew Barney: The CREMASTER Cycle](#)"Howard Singerman on [Laura Owens](#)Lane Relyea on "[Donald Judd: Early Work 1955-1968](#)"Katy Siegel on [Sigmar Polke](#)From New York, Boston, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Santiago de Compostela, Turin, Milan, Vienna, Graz, Austria, Cologne, Frankfurt, Berlin, Stockholm, London, and Dublin
[Click here for more details](#)



links



IN PRINT



PURCHASE

ARCHIVE

- September 2016
- Summer 2016
- May 2016
- April 2016
- March 2016
- February 2016
- January 2016

All back issues



Laura Owens

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES
HOWARD SINGERMAN

There are some very good paintings in MoCA's Laura Owens survey—particularly the large decorative landscapes painted between 1999 and 2002 that borrow from Chinese scroll and screen painting, the rococo pastorals of Beauvais tapestries, and the peaceable critterdom of children's-book illustration. Notable in their absence, though, are a couple of the artist's very strong early works that take pluralism in the museum and a modest and collaborative approach to painting as their relatively explicit subject. It's a way of working that continues to inform Owens's output and that has been an especially important model for a number of younger painters.

In his catalogue essay, curator Paul Schimmel takes one of those missing paintings, dated 1995, as an emblem for Owens's relationship to her sources and to painting's history. In it, a sloping beige floor rises to a narrow strip of museum wall, where some sixty paintings hang. Rendered in shorthand, they catalogue Owens's interests and influences, and their salon-style hanging suggests a refusal of both a singular history and an emplotted present for painting. Certain of the depicted canvases are doubly authored; there are recognizable miniatures of Mondrian and Rothko, and even of this particular Owens. Others are multiply or anonymously so: Owens invited friends and family to paint their work into hers, opening up the painting and spreading its authorship still further.



Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic and oil on canvas, 84 x 96".

The title of Schimmel's catalogue essay, "Plays Well with Others," points nicely to the stylistic and authorial openness of Owens's paintings and to the lightness with which they take their history. A phrase from grade-school report cards, the title also speaks, perhaps paternalistically, to Owens's youth; she is, at thirty-two, by a number of years the youngest painter MoCA has surveyed in such depth. Both Schimmel's essay and Thomas Lawson's contribution seem written partially in defense of the museum's choice. Lawson's text is fashioned around a series of "beginnings" and "attempts," both his and hers, and Schimmel proposes not only Owens's early work but student work in general as a model for her continuing approach, writing that her "reluctance to lay claim to a fixed position might at one time have been attributed to youth (certainly it is characteristic of much student work) but is now an integral aspect of Owens's methodology."

Owens's work moves easily from representation to abstraction—or maybe hovers between them—but then, so does most painting since the 1980s, and after Richter and Polke. Her work is marked neither by agon and the anxiety of influence nor by irony; nor does it lead back to a heightened subjectivity, either as self-assertion or lack. Owens's use of Frankenthaler and Olitski, a couple of familiar foils, is not a strategy to mark the death of painting, but a tactical approach to actually making one. Among the exhibition's strongest works is *Untitled*, 1998, in which nesting arcs of stained color lifted from early-'60s Olitski are dotted with swatches of impasto that seem to take the arcs as structural or even narrative space, reaching across them or hovering on their edges. Owens frequently plays the Olitskian trope of layering crusts of impasto against flat areas of color, but here, as elsewhere, she pulls the impasto away from the edge and toward a scene; it appears in the landscapes refigured as bits of botany or zoology.

Despite Owens's studied idiosyncrasy, her paintings are relatively detached and emotionally cool; that's part of their openness. One of the ways they misstep is by offering protagonists in whom we might invest: the contemporary couple kissing, the girl on horseback under the stars. Her works function most effectively not as stories but as *mise-en-scènes*; the best are not built across a surface by juxtaposition or collage, but composed as tableaux. The question isn't one of abstraction versus representation necessarily, though a few of the least successful works are in fact large abstractions suffering from too much space or too little paint. Instead, it's closer to a choice between absorption and blankness, and about the demeanor a painting might have.

Most of the criticism Owens has received, good or bad, has invoked a consistent list of attributes: lightness, openness, tenderness, innocence, vulnerability. These words describe by turns not only the paintings but Owens's attitude toward painting (and, perhaps, Owens herself, gendered and suggestive of youth as they are). The question of attitude has been a particularly important one for criticism and for painting recently, and maybe a critic's weak phenomenology is a way of getting at it. When it's no longer clear how to link one painting practice to another or how to summon a history of painting, the attitude a painter takes toward his or her practice (as *métier*, tradition, compendium, or catalogue) and the attitude a painting takes toward its being seen have particular importance. The visual and temporal permeability that Owens's paintings propose, the collaborative openness of both painting and painter, seems appropriate to the moment and to the question. And that very permeability raises a different question, a historical one posed to the museum about criteria and necessity, its stock-in-trade: Why this painting, rather than another?

"Laura Owens" will be on view at MoCA, Los Angeles, through June 22; travels to the Aspen Art Museum, Aug. 2–Sept. 28; Milwaukee Art Museum, Oct. 18–Jan. 18, 2004; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, Mar. 4–May 9, 2004.

Howard Singerman is associate professor of art history at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

[f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [v](#) [p](#) [e](#) PERMALINK COMMENTS



DIARY | PICKS | NEWS | VIDEO | FILM | PASSAGES | SLANT | ARTGUIDE | [IN PRINT](#) | 500 WORDS | PREVIEWS | BOOKFORUM | A & E | 中文版

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY