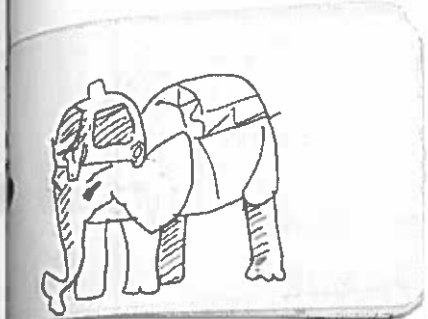


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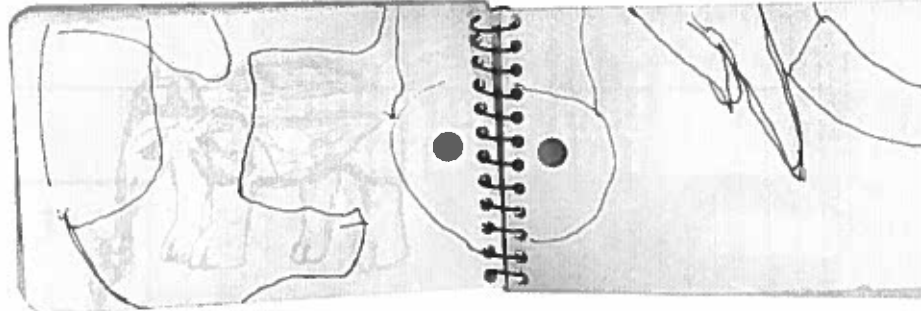
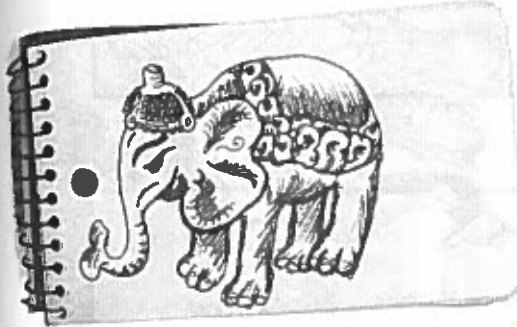
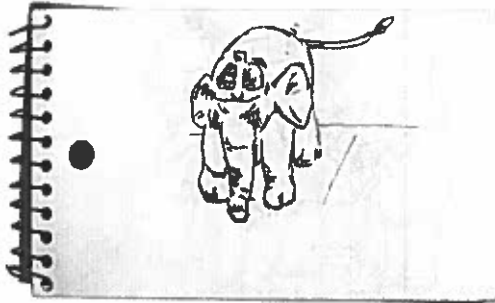
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ORARY EXHIBITIONS



winter 2003
issue no 5

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Steve Anderson, Samuel Casebott,
Christian Cummings, Amy Dane,
Gerald Davis, Charles Irvin,
Stephanie Martz, Jill Newman,
Krista Peel, Scott Reeder and
Douglas P. Smith.
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917 Mt. Washington Drive, LA, CA 90065. www.cakewalkmag.com

Interview with

Laura Owens

by Benjamin Weissman

Laura Owens is one of my favorite people alive. A truly adorable character—odd, sweet, humble, funny, super smart. The second she exited CalArts, her meteoric rise in American painting was launched, a career that's been fun to watch and cheer about. Laura's been touring the planet doing exhibitions, teaching, giving lectures, being held captive at small



eccentric museums, making art under the guise of fellowship, and shaking the hands of various Counts and Countesses who find themselves unable to live without a "Laura Owens." Knees scraped, eye glasses in need of a pushback, Laura always looks like she's just fallen off a bicycle. She has big, amazing, wonder-eyes that take in double the normal dose. A face that's perpetually bewildered, stunned, and a mouth slightly ajar—these charms and countless others contribute to making her the memorable creature she is. Laura doesn't pussyfoot around—she's tough and blunt and always says what's really on her mind. A rare gift in these *if-you-don't-have-anything-nice-to-say-don't-say-it* days. I count on Laura for her candid takes on things. She has one of the best belly laughs in the world: big, messy, and out of control. When you tell her something true, yet unbelievable, she'll invariably say, "Shut up!" but it's said in a green light, tell-me-more kind of way. We conversed below via electronic mail.

Ben: To hell with the first snow question.

Laura: I liked the snow question... I am just slow. I don't know how common it is but I remember once getting about three to four feet of snow in Ohio then having a warm day where it melted about six inches then a new storm blew through that night and froze the water. Anyway, being only about 40 pounds at the time it was like walking on a frozen pond but it was all super fluffy snow underneath. I punched a few holes in the ice and dug out different sections of snow making an underground house which I was able to sit up in. I brought all my toys and moved out

under a tree in the back yard. Looking up through the ice I saw a blurry picture of tree branches and sky.

Ben: You built an underground ice cave? That's so rad. Describe your first experience with a cake.

Laura: Birthday number two. Projectile vomiting dark chocolate cake from high chair onto favorite small friends.

Ben: Always the best way to show your appreciation. What childhood experiences have made their way into your paintings?

Laura: None that I am consciously aware of... maybe just perhaps my favorite color which is in a memory of sticking my head in an industrial ice cooler and seeing this beautiful cool blue green.

Ben: It's important to know your limitations: where are you most vulnerable in painting?

Laura: That's hard... hmmm... I guess it is important for me to think: "What am I leaving out? What do I think cannot be in a painting?" and then challenging myself to try to work it in. It doesn't always work but I think that is why I am now thinking about the figure so much. I definitely have not worked it out and am at greatest risk of embarrassment by trying. The new quote I found today is "we often learn more from bold mistakes than from cautious equivocation." I also was really impressed at the time I read Andy Warhol's book *Philosophy from A to B*, where he explains that it is much better to simply state all your faults up front to any new friend or mate, especially if they, the faults that is, are unlikely to go away any time upon. There is more to it than that... I can't remember. I

read it at CalArts. I have to think about that some more...

Ben: When you're cleaning house or studio what things do you have the most trouble throwing out, what makes the cut?

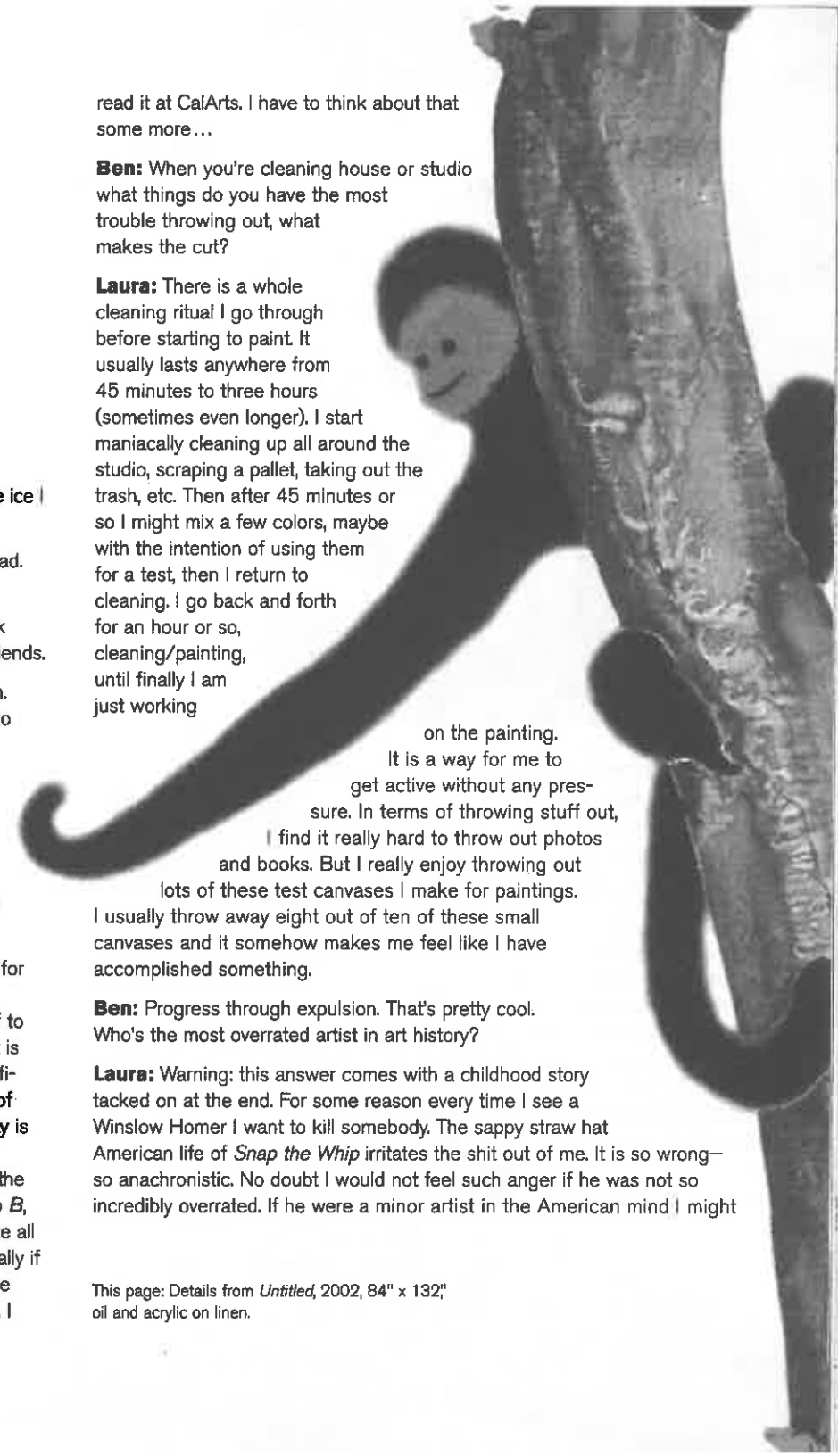
Laura: There is a whole cleaning ritual I go through before starting to paint. It usually lasts anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours (sometimes even longer). I start maniacally cleaning up all around the studio, scraping a pallet, taking out the trash, etc. Then after 45 minutes or so I might mix a few colors, maybe with the intention of using them for a test, then I return to cleaning. I go back and forth for an hour or so, cleaning/painting, until finally I am just working

on the painting. It is a way for me to get active without any pressure. In terms of throwing stuff out, I find it really hard to throw out photos and books. But I really enjoy throwing out lots of these test canvases I make for paintings. I usually throw away eight out of ten of these small canvases and it somehow makes me feel like I have accomplished something.

Ben: Progress through expulsion. That's pretty cool. Who's the most overrated artist in art history?

Laura: Warning: this answer comes with a childhood story tacked on at the end. For some reason every time I see a Winslow Homer I want to kill somebody. The sappy straw hat American life of *Snap the Whip* irritates the shit out of me. It is so wrong—so anachronistic. No doubt I would not feel such anger if he was not so incredibly overrated. If he were a minor artist in the American mind I might

This page: Details from *Untitled*, 2002, 84" x 132" oil and acrylic on linen.



What am I leaving out?

the art teacher, Mrs. Magi and her fake art classes and then go off on all the students who like myself enrolled in too many art classes just to improve their GPA. When the bell rang he'd wave his hand at the wrist like a child, look me in the eye, and in a whiny voice say "Bye-bye Laura, have fun with your cra-yons." Creepy. Regardless, Winslow Homer is not a great artist and should not be given retrospectives at the Met every five years.

Ben: Most overrated artists working today?

Laura: He is a man. He is German. He is Richter. He is good. But not that good.

Ben: Take it easy there, brutal one. I always thought Richter never made a bad piece of art. He's always been semi-flawless to me.

Laura: I have definitely seen some bad Richters. He did one that was sort of like a hugely oversized McCracken-finish German flag. Ouch! It was really bad.

Ben: That sounds kind of good, especially McCracken style. Most embarrassing music you love listening to?

Laura: Elliot Smith.

Ben: Elliot Smith kicks ass. How can he be embarrassing? He's emotional and breathy which always veers dangerously close to embarrassing, true, true, true, but he's smart, fucked-up, and angry, always on the losing end of anything having to do with love...but I don't think he's sentimental. Do you know who I like? Prepare yourself. Elton John, The Doobie Brothers, Bette Midler, Manhattan Transfer.

Laura: Manhattan Transfer! Whoa! I think they are my grandparents all-time favorite. I really have a hard time imagining you listening to them—are you alone when this happens?

Ben: All my Manhattan Transfer listening occurs in public—usually in a store or elevator, booming from some unknown source (I don't have any of their albums), and when I hear them something comes over me and my upper lip curls and my head starts bobbing. It's a sickness.

Laura: That's nucking futs!

Ben: Who's your favorite living writer and who of the dead do you most admire?

Laura: Too hard! Too many!

What do I think cannot be in a painting?

Ben: Bad answer. You're going to think I'm a real psycho for asking you this. But what is a woman? What's it like for you to be a woman or a girl? Please explain.

Laura: This question is impossible. I have nothing to compare it to. I tried to recall all those various incarnations as men, boys, animals and insects. Kind of murky. I do think I felt a lot more solid and sure of myself pre-puberty. I am hoping that comes back after menopause. Why do women wear make-up and perfume? Because they are ugly and they smell bad. I guess that's a funny joke. Maybe not. It's hard to generalize about an entire sex. They do make babies. I think that is way cool. I love that boobs are functional. I like hour glass shaped ladies. The more curvy the better, I guess it just looks right to me. I don't know what else to say....

Ben: That's a cool answer. Remember that art collective Pleasure Function? Jenny Holzer and Dick Prince were in it, Fend, Peter Nadin? Maybe you were like 13 when this was going on. All the rage. Very socialistic. Kind of cool. Your "functional bosom" comment reminds me of them.

I want to talk about your writing. It kicks ass. What you do with written language, this fantastic blasted out imagination has similarities to your paintings. Maybe not. I'm forcing a comparison. But one can be made. Talk about your impulse to write stories.

Laura: I feel like I have a lot of stories playing in my head all the time. I also have a vague distant view of this really important story that I want

or need to write. I guess I wish I could articulate them and so writing is starting to do that. I think I have quite a ways to go though and I get sort of stuck a lot.

Ben: Let's talk about cake again. Name all the cakes you've made in your life?

Laura: Chocolate. That's the only kind I have ever made. I used to make microwave chocolate cakes when I came home after high school.

Ben: Answer this: Why do wedding cakes always suck? Shouldn't an important event require a perfect cake?

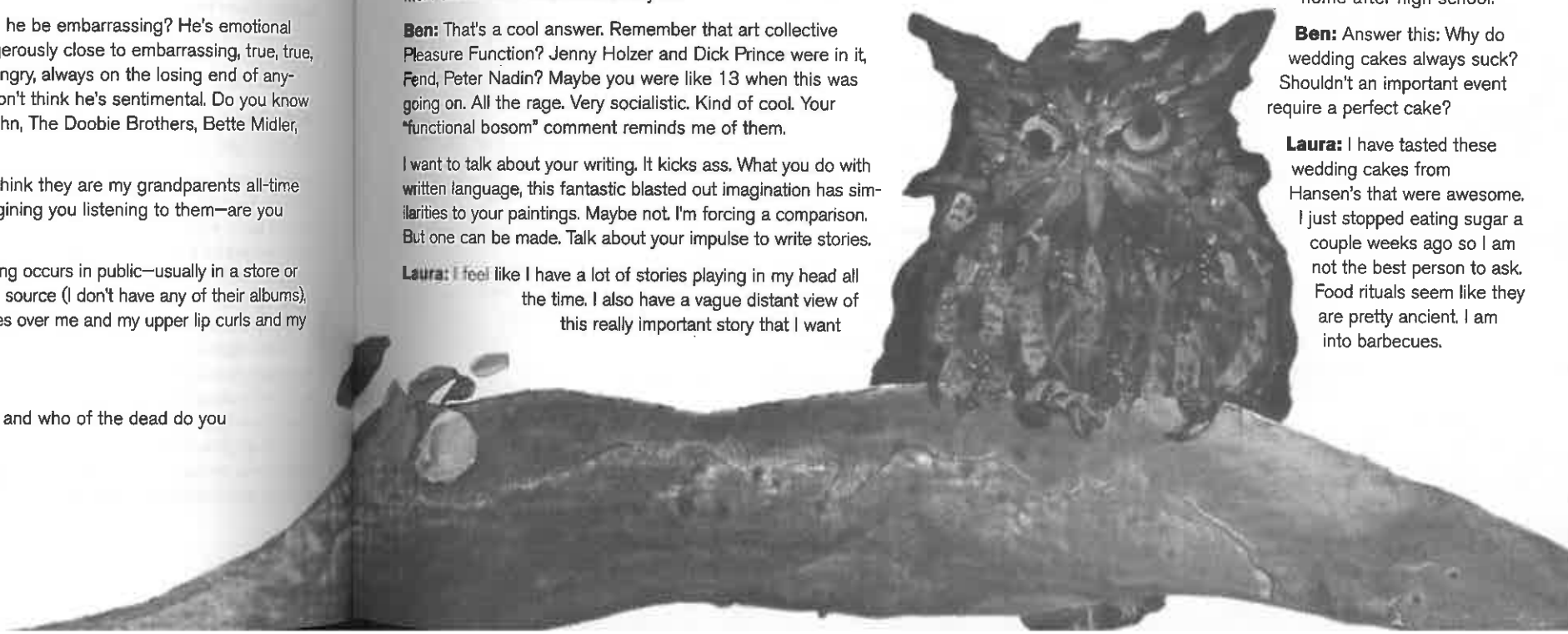
Laura: I have tasted these wedding cakes from Hansen's that were awesome. I just stopped eating sugar a couple weeks ago so I am not the best person to ask. Food rituals seem like they are pretty ancient. I am into barbecues.



laugh it off "Oh, there's another one of those Homer paintings... quite crudely moralistic, but painted OK... nice waves," but instead I look at those paintings and see everything that is wrong with this country. It might seem, though, that this prejudice stems from the trauma inflicted on me by AP American History teacher, Al Pleasnick, in my junior year of high school. A teacher who repeatedly kicked my chair and in a whiny mocking voice said, "What's that? (Kick) You got your crayons Laura? (Kick) You got your crayons under your chair? (Then switch to loud normal voice) You want to see real art?!" He would then pick up a long wooden ruler and slap it up against the wall high above his head where a poster of a Winslow Homer painting hung. And while repeatedly hitting the poster over and over again shout "This is Art!" He would wind down with a tirade against

Above: *Untitled*, 2001, 14" x 10," watercolor, tissue paper, felt on paper.

Right: detail from *Untitled*, 2002, 84" x 132," oil and acrylic on linen.



Drain my blood and burn it.

Ben: I concur. Marinated animals sizzling on a grill is a beautiful thing. As far as cakewalks go, talk about walking the cake, describe a personal cakewalk, when has it been too easy for you?

Laura: Sadly, I am too neurotic to let anything be too easy. I try though.

Ben: What's the most useful thing you've learned about painting in the last two years?

Laura: It takes exactly six times the amount of time you think it takes to do anything. Realizing this made me have less anxiety and be more patient.

Ben: What's the worst thing about sex?

Laura: I guess the worst is when you feel like no one will ever want to have sex with you for the rest of your life.

Ben: Is there one part of your body that amuses you more than another?

Laura: I am trying to get into my body. I think I have been floating about three feet above for quite sometime. Bumping into things a lot, not good.

Ben: Please explain why video installation art is so deep and cool and exciting and speaks to core of who we are as knuckle-walking beasts?

Laura: Huh?

Ben: Exactly. You and I were once talking about a certain someone's vacant video work and you said the funniest, most graphic thing I've ever heard. You said, "Drain my blood and burn it."

Laura: Yeah, I guess I didn't like it very much.

Ben: Yeah, just a little. Let's continue on. What historical event rocked your world the most?

Laura: The Northridge earthquake happened my last semester of grad school. I was pretty sure the building I was in was going to fall over. It didn't. But I stopped worrying about making art so much and just made stuff I liked and wanted to see.

Ben: That is gnarly. Do you have any recurrent nightmares?

Laura: Nope.

Ben: Lucky you. What's cool about Ohio?

Laura: I have no idea. I haven't been there in so long. I am sure there is something cool about it now. When I was younger there were a lot of clubs and thrift stores in Cleveland that were cool.

Ben: What's the most ghoulish thing a collector ever said to you?

Laura: Someone once very early on brought over two collectors to my studio who came over and walked around the perimeter looking at stuff, whispering to each other and then walked outside and never said a word.

Ben: That's not polite. Did you smack them?

Laura: I kicked them.

Detail from *Untitled*, 2002, 84" x 132"
oil and acrylic on linen.

