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# frieze



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# Summer 2003

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• Laura Owens *Untitled* 2000 Oil and acrylic on linen 279 x 335 cm  
MoCA, Los Angeles

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## Hans Schabus

Secession/Kerstin Engholm  
Galerie, Vienna

Seeing Hans Schabus' recent parallel solo exhibitions was like watching a film and being taken on to the set at the same time – the Kerstin Engholm Galerie showed plans and a model of the work the artist had made for his exhibition at the Secession.

It's hard to say whether it would have been better to be privy to the layout and workings of Schabus' large-scale installation *Astronaut (komme gleich)* (*Astronaut, I'll be right there*, 2003) before or after experiencing it. The installation consisted of a replica of his studio in grey painted cardboard on a light wooden frame. It could only be accessed from one direction via a thin winding subterranean passageway that made use of the building's cellar. The featureless entrance tunnel was pretty much like the ones that appear in paranoid dreams, and as a result the tendency was to race through it like a laboratory rat, without necessarily knowing why. It's a matter of taste whether you like to be involuntarily and bodily involved in an art experience in this way, but it certainly created a certain amount of disorientation that heightened the effect of eventually emerging bleary-eyed into an empty, windowless, life-size model of the artist's studio. This faux room-within-a-room had the charm of an abandoned bunker with paper-thin walls. Escaping via a side door into the relative normality of the remaining space around it placed you in a more subtly precarious position – the one in between, with nothing much to see and no obvious exit in sight.

Aimless journeys and tunnelling are something of a recurring motif in Schabus' work to date. In his video *Western* (2002), premiered at Manifesta VI last



Hans Schabus  
*Astronaut*  
(*komme gleich*)  
Astronaut  
(I'll be right there)  
2003  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

year, the artist plays an anti-hero on an uneventful odyssey, rowing his sailing boat *Forlorn* through the Viennese sewer system. A short peek at the video at the opening put me off – simply because floating organic waste isn't the kind of thing you want to spend much time contemplating. That aside, the video fails to be engrossing despite its obvious and weighty referencing to Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), which features the same sewers, and to Bas Jan Ader's ill-fated transatlantic journey. Apparently on 'The Third Man Tour' you're told an anecdote about Orson Welles' refusal to wade through the muck for the final scene. Schabus, on the other hand, makes a point of being utterly composed about it.

This and another video, *Astronaut* (2003), were shown on monitors in two utility rooms adjoining the main exhibition hall at Secession. *Astronaut* documents the artist digging a narrow shaft

Context is something artists can either create, worm or sail their way through.

in the roof of his own studio and dumping earth in an ever-growing pile on one side of the room. Here too the artist and the filming are very matter-of-fact, making the work even more absurd. The final sequence of the video features a claustrophobic spot-lit walk in the tunnel to the accompaniment of heavy breathing and an anti-climax – the end of the shaft is reached, more earth is shovelled.

Schabus' work rewards those who like making connections between things, so although these exhibitions relied more on a cumulative effect than the strength of the individual pieces, there was a satisfying completeness to his exploration of tunnelling as a metaphor for artistic labour, while the displaced material and the hole created

by this activity worked as sculpture or installation. Here his use of real and constructed spaces and Vienna's historically saturated earth and subterranean architecture suggested that context is something that artists can either create, worm or sail their way through. The Secession building is like a well-loved brooch worn by middle-aged Viennese women, the type who wrap up in fur in colder months. Schabus mounted a yellow neon sign which read 'astronaut' on its golden globe – a gesture that was the equivalent of hanging a huge digital watch on this nouveau semi-precious jewel of a place. In doing so he seems to be suggesting that outer space is in fact everything that is outside our inner spaces.

Dominic Eichler

## Laura Owens

MoCA, Los Angeles

At 33 Laura Owens is the youngest person to have been given a survey show at MoCA's, and it's supremely deserved. Since graduating from Cal Arts nine years ago she has proved herself a near-genius at mixing representational elements and abstraction,

producing paintings so exuberant and inspired they take your critical breath away – an unusual feeling after exiting a morgue, I mean museum.

In any other city besides Los Angeles this show would be welcomed with grateful eyeballs, but since Owens lives and works locally and was educated at the lil' art school by the freeway this early career show has to duke it out with the villagers. Even though her exhibitions have been met with rousing acceptance in New York and Europe,

LA, which keeps a suspicious eye on its own, is still wary. Owens has been slaughtered in the local papers for being the creation of writers and teachers fond of her work, and for not painting by the golden rule. The clerics of canvas have also levelled those criticisms at painters such as Chris Ofili and Peter Doig, two peers oozing with talent. The moribund issue of bad painting circles around its conservative self, begging for what? A realistically rendered snout, a perfectly foreshort-

ened torso? Last time I checked we were in great need of a fresh handling of paint, which is exactly why Owens is of great interest now. Her paintings are inventive, arresting, unpredictable.

With Owens' preponderance of critters her show resembles a petting zoo, an ambiguous jungle book with bears, bats and bespectacled monkeys, as well as painterly experiments in animal hybrids. In one small painting (*Untitled*, 2002–3) a thorny tree branch floats diagonally across the

With its preponderance of critters, Laura Owen's show resembles a petting zoo, an ambiguous jungle full of bears, bats and bespectacled monkeys.

Laura Owens

Untitled

2002

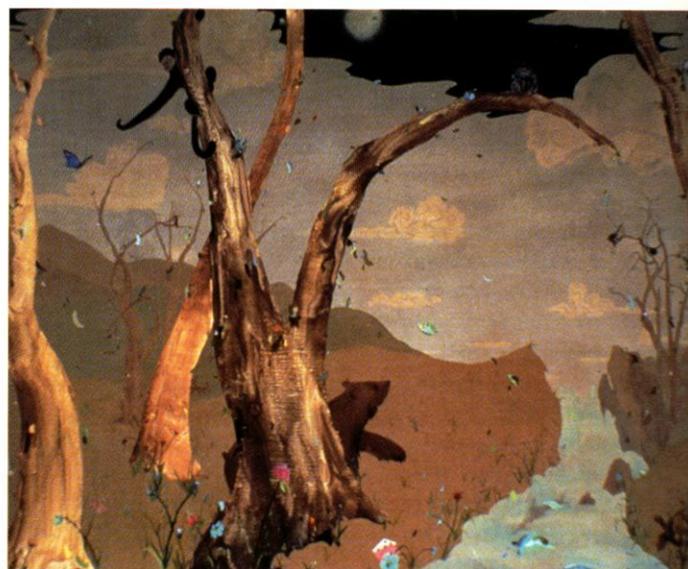
Oil and acrylic on linen  
213 x 335 cm

picture, with lush flora and fauna extruding from every possible direction. Two cryptic animals reside on that branch: one furry, butterscotchy fellow of uncertain genus inspects a bulbous blossom; behind him, on another branch made of paint applied like triple-layer frosting, a blue creature of bleeding colour stands in profile holding a tiny red flower.

Like the gore inside a filled chocolate, Owens' buttery marks trigger viewer salivation. She does miraculous things with big impasto swathes of colour, painting on top of the paint like she's decorating pastry, polka dots sprinkled over icing piled on top of custard. Great mounds of confection appear next to barren areas of raw canvas. The contrast is severe – the better to appreciate paint in excess, as physical presence. Owens' countless references are reverential, playful, confident. In *Untitled* (1998) she's looking over the shoulder of Joan Miró, but really it's just a gargantuan doodle. At other times she's affectionately reconsidering Henri Rousseau's horse and rider or Helen Frankenthaler's

washy world, which reminds me of how W. G. Sebald in his novel *The Emigrants* (1996) had a Nabokov-like figure scampering through an Ithaca hillside catching butterflies; though Lewis Carroll is probably the writer most closely akin to Owens.

*Untitled* (1997) is an enormous comic mind-fuck of a landscape featuring three horizontal blue stripes (ocean) and a huge expanse of washed-out white-blue horizon. Two blobs of paint, generalized V-shapes indicating birds in flight, hover above the water. Both have their shadows airbrushed below them. A dark blue dot and its shadow float to the right. The dot is just a dot, but it's the craziest dot imaginable. At the top of the painting a fragment of shadow alludes to something out of frame, like another painted mark. The four shadows signal a light source above the painting (the sun? track lighting?), over the viewer's right shoulder, and it all makes sense, sort of, but not really: how could these birds and this mysterious dot cast shadows on ocean air? The painting causes fertile mental chaos, happy



disorientation – Owens creates brilliant illusions and then mocks them.

If Owens has a weakness, it might be found in her big anti-war painting finished minutes before the opening of this exhibition. Tiny stick figures in cowboy hats (President Bush and his gang) fire pistols into the air and kill. Nature fights back, with tiny birds leading the charge. Dabs of paint appear on the horizon as if on autopilot, whereas in other paintings the random swatches have an obsessive, urgent vibe about them. Also, two sentimental paintings – one of two people kissing, another of a couple lying in bed – are

commendable on the level of puppy love, but there's little going on formally and they suffer in relation to her rigorous other work.

Owens is an articulate painter who can do many things exceedingly well. She has a great sense of humour in a medium that chokes on its own seriousness. Her paintings are brilliant, absurd and unlike anything we've seen before, and in the end we must love an artist who recently said in an interview, 'I feel no shame in having paintings be as grandiose and ridiculous as possible.'

Benjamin Weissman

## Simon Martin

Counter, London

William James, in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), called it 'the gap that is extremely active'. Simon Martin, in titling his large wall-mounted polychrome relief of a starling, went for the more poetic *The Mysterious Suspicion* (2001–3), but the two designations refer to the same condition – that frustrating interval when you can't shift a fact from the tip of your tongue to somewhere more useful. Martin's chosen appellate is lifted from René Magritte, and his artwork – as becomes apparent only after a long period of wondering why its gracefully moulded contours and precisely painted rendering of iridescent green-and-purple plumage seem so familiar – is a fairly accurate copy of *Star* (Starling, 1992), by Martin Honert. Like *Sturnus vulgaris*, Martin is sometimes a thieving bird; what counts, though, is the gap. Honert hasn't exhibited in London

since 1997, when he showed several fowl reliefs in a group show at the old Saatchi Gallery. Shockingly, that's time enough to be forgotten, or at least demoted to the tip of the collective tongue. And so, while *The Mysterious Suspicion* may be a genre-buster (site-specific appropriation, anyone?) it is also a sympathetic resurrection that deliberately diverts attention away from Martin himself and towards the temporarily unknown.

A failure to recognize the source, however, may only engender a monolithic bemusement that the show's other two works won't allay – that, indeed, their presence only exacerbates. Since both also feature animals, theoretically one could ensnare the show's contents in a web of shared meaning based on characteristics of the natural world. But whatever one rigs up feels like a poor substitute for what's seemingly there – or what isn't, since a work like *Monkiness is the Whatness of All Monkey* (2000–3) most strongly suggests an adherence to Morse Peckham's analysis of art's function as a risk-free rehearsal of real-

world sensations of uncertainty. *Monkiness* ... is a big white sphere (labelled as 'mixed media' but probably coated fibreglass) into which the face of a cosmically amused chimpanzee has been smoothly sculpted. As your eyes slips across its highly polished surfaces,

twanging off the jug-ears and seesawing around the grin without finding acceptable purchase, it's impossible not to be stymied by its malfeasant juxtaposition of iconographies.

Here is how the piece came about: Martin – who used to make Minimalist



Simon Martin

Strawberry Poison

Dart Frog

1998–9

Oil on canvas

122 x 183 cm

## Laura Owens

### MoCA

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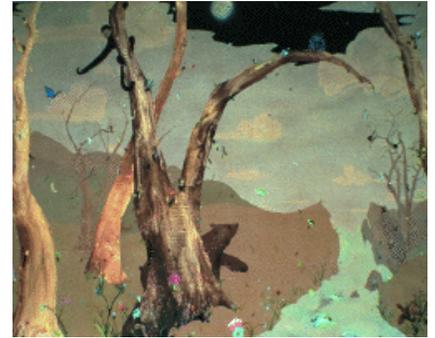
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### About this review

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By *Benjamin Weissman*



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