

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

## Loving the canvas: [All Edition]

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### Abstract

[Laura Owens] will speak about her work and lead a walking tour of the exhibit at 6:15 p.m. A preview, free to members and to non-members with regular museum admission, follows. The exhibit formally opens Saturday. For all her seeming informality, Owens is a phenomenon among American painters.

The Milwaukee Art Museum's staff has stripped the Vogel-Helfaer Galleries of their usual tenants for the occasion and hung Owens' paintings on tall-ceilinged, white-painted walls in the lakefront space.

What: "Laura Owens" When: Saturday through Jan. 18 Where: Vogel/ Helfaer Contemporary Galleries, Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Drive Opening event: 6:15 p.m. today, with gallery talk by Owens Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Thursdays, when the museum stays open until 8 p.m. How much: free with art museum membership or regular museum admission. Information: (414) 224-3200.

### Full Text

Loving the canvas

By JAMES AUER Journal Sentinel art critic

Thursday, October 16, 2003

Nothing you read or hear about Laura Owens prepares you for meeting the artist in person.

Will she be a heavyweight intellectual, freighted down with theories about paint application and the importance of historicity in art, as some critiques of her recent work suggest?

Or will she be a brush-wielding, giddily spontaneous Californian?

As it happens, Owens, 33, is neither.

She is refreshingly frank, open and human -- the result, perhaps, of her almost too-normal Midwestern childhood, in Norwalk, Ohio, and her decision to seek a graduate education in Los Angeles.

"I just love paintings," said Owens, whose one-person exhibit -- an eclectic but hypnotically involving mix of works that ricochet from abstraction to representation and back again -- opens with a preview tonight in the contemporary-art galleries of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Owens will speak about her work and lead a walking tour of the exhibit at 6:15 p.m. A preview, free to members and to non-members with regular museum admission, follows. The exhibit formally opens Saturday. For all her seeming informality, Owens is a phenomenon among American painters.

Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which first exhibited Owens' show, has said she "is recognized as belonging to a new generation of artists investigating formal issues and questioning the practice of painting."

Margaret Andera, the curator in charge of bringing Owens' imagery and words to the Milwaukee Art Museum, calls her "one of the most important painters to emerge in the past decade."

The artist herself seems impervious to this kind of adulation: She simply adores the physical act of making art.

"I love looking at paintings, I love making paintings, I love thinking about them," she said.

Asked why she had chosen painting when many of her young, hip contemporaries have opted for film, video or found-object sculpture, Owens said:

"I think it's a more intimate experience with painting. It's more of a one-on-one. I love the paintings that I have a real deep connection with and have had experiences with -- life-changing experiences."

When she was a child, Owens recalled, she often visited the Toledo Art Museum.

"They had a Caravaggio there that was really great that I remember looking at," she said. "There was a lot of 20th-century art there, too -- a Richard Estes that I liked a lot, and a Larry Poons that I remember, and a Georgia O'Keeffe. I was kind of into everything."

Blending joy, terror

Being "into everything" has served Owens well in a time when all of art history seems to have been collapsed, like an esoteric accordion, into a single bellows that can be pumped by all comers.

Her paintings resonate with a peculiar openness to an amazing variety of influences, from European modernism to Japanese landscapes, from photography to children's book illustration.

There's a certain disarming playfulness, too -- an aura of lighthearted whimsy and risk-taking that is particularly appealing in our media-saturated era, with its sometimes uncomfortable mixture of privilege and menace.

Joy and terror -- masked by bright colors and swathed in smashing decoration -- seem to inhabit the same stage. Owens' work, simultaneously soothing and unsettling, is a show curtain for the next act in our lives, an act that we both dread and anticipate.

Her ability to produce this sort of work emerged, she said, out of two different approaches to art education.

As an undergraduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Owens was equipped with a broad array of tools and techniques to be used pretty much as she wished.

This basic technical education stood her in good stead at the California Institute of Arts in Valencia, where the emphasis was on concepts, critiques and seminars, instead of studio work and hands-on training.

Considered in tandem, the two experiences, one practical and the other hands-off, helped her develop a personal vision and style that allowed her to set up a studio and start selling her work to collectors when she was only a few years out of graduate school.

By keeping costs low -- she rented space in unfashionable Eagle Rock, north of Los Angeles between Glendale and Pasadena -- and simplifying her lifestyle, she was able to wear herself off part-time jobs and launch a full-time painting career.

Her career has benefited, she believes, from the fact that she is in tolerant Los Angeles rather than tradition-bound New York City.

"We don't have those big historical museums here," she said, "or numerous generations of artists."

Most of Los Angeles' visual artists are new and young, and that helps, too.

"You don't have the feeling of the past being permeated into the present," Owens said. "It's kind of like no one cares what you're doing. And for me, that translates into an incredible amount of freedom."

Nor are the media critics as powerful on the West Coast as they are in the East.

"In New York," Owens said, "the (New York) Times reviews really matter to people, at least those that live there. Whereas here, everybody reads the L.A. Times, but there's a little bit more of a feeling that, 'OK, take it in stride, that's one person's opinion.'"

Planning, with spontaneity

Just because she is free to do as she wishes doesn't mean Owens is casual in her approach to her craft.

She works hard to turn out the kind of big-scale works that she herself enjoys looking at. Only when she tries to please people other than herself does she get into trouble.

"I let it happen when I'm planning it," Owens said. "I do a lot of sketches and drawings when I'm fooling around in the preliminary stages, but once it comes down to how I'm going to make this thing, then I get more programmatic about it."

At this stage, she generally makes a full-scale preparatory drawing the same size as the canvas she'll eventually be using. Often, she said, she will draw or paint a small study in the same colors she has selected for the larger work.

That way, she said, there is little room for accident in the final stage of the process: creating the actual picture.

Still, her own attitude matters enormously.

"It's almost a law of physics," she said, "that the more excited I am about seeing or making a painting, the more likely it turns out to be one of my better works."

But for all her detailed preparation and careful execution, accident and inspiration continue to play a part in Owens' working life.

"You can't really plan to make it happen," she admitted. "You can just set up the circumstances that make it happen."

A room of its own

The local display of Owens' touring show has been set up to allow viewers to trace her development, from collaged layerings to pin-sharp drawings, from realistic landscapes to abstract doodlings.

The Milwaukee Art Museum's staff has stripped the Vogel-Helfaer Galleries of their usual tenants for the occasion and hung Owens' paintings on tall-ceilinged, white-painted walls in the lakefront space.

As a result, Owens' big-scale works -- 20 paintings plus several works on paper, mostly borrowed from collectors for the occasion -- provide a surprisingly harmonious cacophony of dissimilar but related images.

Most spectacular of the lot is a huge, two-part painting, "Untitled" (1999), which is dominated by two monkeys that appear to be waving to each other across the space that separates the vividly rendered panels. By standing between them, the viewer becomes, in effect, an integral component of the art experience.

Other works range from precisionist interiors, deftly done in a mix of geometry and cool-yet-warm California pastels to outdoor scenes that suggest a blending of Matisse with Maurice Sendak.

"Laura Owens" is accompanied by a catalog with essays by curator Schimmel and art historian Thomas Lawson.

IF YOU GO

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