

People are Talking about

the happy painter

The art of Laura Owens is filled with surprises. Dodie Kazanjian takes a closer look.

a young couple in bed. Bumblebees fat with honey. Monkeys swinging from trees. The pleasure principle, which has often played a leading role in California art, is up to its old tricks and a whole lot of new ones in the work of Laura Owens, who is having her first survey show this month at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Owens's outrageously likable paintings operate on several senses at once: You can practically hear the bumblebees buzz and taste the ice-cream colors. Wildly innovative, her work is open to just about every art-historical influence you can think of—Chinese landscapes, Peruvian textiles, embroidery, American folk art, the Douanier Rousseau, Pop Art, Color Field abstraction, Renaissance drawings, Matisse, you name it. But Owens mixes and matches these sources with playful brio. In her (usually) large canvases, abstraction and representation go hand in hand. She gives us flowers, skies, trees, badgers, bats, cityscapes, and, more recently, people, and what saves all this from the unbearable lightness of decoration is that Owens can really paint.

SITTING PRETTY: THE ARTIST PHOTOGRAPHED IN HER SAN FRANCISCO STUDIO.



SEASON'S GREETINGS: AN UNTITLED WORK FROM 2003 DEPICTING AUTUMN.

painter to emerge in Southern California in the nineties."

Owens, 32, was born and raised in Euclid, Ohio. She discovered art at the age of fourteen, got her B.F.A. at RISD, went on to CalArts for her M.F.A., and never looked back. In 1996, Gavin Brown asked her to join his gallery in New York, which immediately placed her among some of the coolest artists on several continents—Chris Ofili, Elizabeth Peyton, Rirkrit Tiravanija. "I knew just from the way she approached life that she was a good artist," Brown tells me. Some critics balked at her decorative bent, but most were bowled over by her mischievous originality. Reviewing her show at Gavin Brown in 1998, the *Times*'s Roberta Smith called the work "full of buoyant, inventively beautiful pictorial effects and suggestive contrasts that don't boil down to simple conceptual jokes." Her work is now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Centre Georges Pompidou.

The artist lives in the Echo Park section of L.A. with her boyfriend and fellow painter, Edgar Bryan, and feels no need whatsoever to be in New York. "I spent a month there once, and I just hated it," she says. "It's

art all totally different here. In New York people talk about bars or restaurants; here you go to someone's house and they talk about what's going on with their garden and their retaining walls. It's a whole other conversation."

Another thing Owens likes about California is the collaborative spirit among artists there. She has done joint exhibitions with her friends Monique Prieto and Jorge Pardo, and last year, along with London artists Peter Doig and Ofili, she initiated an artist-curated exhibition called "Cavepainting" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. "Collaboration takes you back to the fun of making art, because there's way less ego involvement. It allows this immense freedom." A turning point for Owens came in her last year at CalArts, when she met visiting New York artist Mary Heilmann. "Mary didn't think of painting as being a huge struggle," Owens says. "She gave me the idea that you could approach painting casually, with a light touch, as something you enjoy, something you can think of as happiness or romance or love or memory. Painting is just one of the things I do. I think if you make it the only thing, you can somehow kill it." □

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Credit: Joseph Cultice. Hair and makeup, Jamie Costabile for Solo Artists/Nars.;

Person pictured: Laura Owens;

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Image 2: ;

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