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ART

ART; A Painter With Lots Of Voices And No Comment

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

THE airy, winsome paintings of Laura Owens prove as cunningly hard to pin down as the woman herself. A survey of her work from the last eight years (on view through May 9 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, the last stop on a four-city tour) reveals a breathtaking diversity in style, imagery and technique, often within a single canvas.

One painting might be a purely decorative abstraction; another an architectural interior or a figurative work. A single mammoth landscape might contain all of the following: asymmetrical bare branches that nod to Japanese woodcuts, naïve animals that refer to Henri Rousseau's paintings, atmospheric washes that evoke Helen Frankenthaler's stain canvases and thick threads of paint squeezed directly from the tube that mimic embroidery.

It's painting about the whole repertory of painting itself -- a heady game that also yields canvases of remarkable delicacy and beauty.

Since graduating from the California Institute of the Arts (known as CalArts) in 1994, Ms. Owens, 33, has been a major force in the resurgent interest in painting in cities like Los Angeles, New York and Berlin. Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, who organized Ms. Owens's museum show, said: "I think she's arguably the best, most complex and inventive painter to have emerged from Los Angeles in this decade." Mr. Schimmel notes that even in Ms. Owens's first solo show, at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Santa Monica in 1995, her contradictory strategies for picture-making were the hallmark of the work. "Although you could finally see the artist had the same touch throughout, it really came off at least as a number of voices, even personalities."

This kind of fluctuation was also evident in the variety of responses Ms. Owens gave through intermediaries to a request for an interview: no, yes, maybe. Her final answer: speak, instead, to people who know her work well -- a collaborative idea consistent with her concept of using multiple viewpoints that notably do not include her own. That may be the point. Mr. Schimmel wrote in her show's catalog, "This reluctance to lay claim to a fixed position might at one time have been attributed to youth but is now an integral aspect of Owens's methodology."

Debra Singer, one of the three organizers of the Whitney Biennial, in which an 11-foot-tall painting by Ms. Owens is on view through May 30, confirms the artist's reluctance to discuss her work. "Laura likes to keep things quite mysterious," she said, "to the extent that she didn't let us see the painting until it arrived here -- which of course, while exciting when we saw it, was a little unnerving." In the untitled painting, billowing gray-green-blue washes establish the mystical atmosphere of a moonlit landscape where storybook images -- forest animals, spider webs, pirate ships -- converge under a tree. It is a lyrical arrangement of elements that flips between illustration and abstract patterning.

"This tension between the decorative mark and the recognizable imagery is what I think the painting's about," Ms. Singer said, adding that there's no special story Ms. Owens is going to let us in on. "Nothing's by chance. Even when there's this kind of loose, open sense to it -- that's really her expertise in terms of handling paint -- the process is extremely rigorous and planned."

But it's never exactly the same process from one work to the next. Ms. Owens, who is represented by ACME in Los Angeles and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York (where she has a show on view through April 10), is reported to be obsessed with the difficulty of starting. Her extended preparation can involve dozens of studies, for which she freely lifts images from magazines, crafts, folk art and other so-called minor sources as well as major sources like Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Florine Stettheimer and Kenneth Noland. She scans sketches into a computer and reworks them in Photoshop, sometimes making full-size transfer drawings to synthesize all the fragments into one complex composition. In the Museum of Contemporary Art catalog, Ms. Owens describes this period as: "Waiting until it gels, sitting through the pain. Like the hard part of meditation." Mr. Schimmel notes in his essay that she has a Ping-Pong table in her studio and he finds the game an apt metaphor for her methods.

Early on, Ms. Owens decided to make large canvases -- comparable in scale to the heroic Abstract Expressionist paintings she saw as a teenager visiting the Museum of Art in Cleveland, where she grew up -- but to fill them with many small incidents often derived from anonymous and feminine sources, like an estate sale embroidered pillow. Her favorite museum is the Barnes Foundation outside Philadelphia, and its eclectic collection, hung salon-style, bears a relationship to the way Ms. Owens juxtaposes different genres within her paintings. So does her early work as an installation artist at CalArts, where she put together forms and textures in three-dimensional space before turning to painting.

The acceptance of painting on its own terms had just started to take root at CalArts when Ms. Owens's class arrived, said Bonnie Clearwater, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, who lived in Los Angeles in the early 1990's. "The school was really known for being antipainting," she said, "and if you were going to paint you'd better have a very good reason. It's important to see Laura's work as coming out of this sort of discussion."

The feeling of having to justify becoming a painter seems to have weighed heavily on Ms. Owens. But Mary Heilmann, who went to CalArts from New York as a visiting artist, showed her that

painters can do serious work while keeping a breezy attitude about it. So did the 1994 Northridge earthquake, which destroyed part of the school and served as another reminder that to paint or not to paint is, after all, not a life-and-death matter.

Ms. Heilmann liked Ms. Owens right away. "She had that dreamy type of personality where she seems like she's on another planet when you're talking to her," she said. "The way she is thinking in her mind about painting gets completely turned over from work to work. It's deeply postmodern in that you step back from the idea of how to make a painting and then just sort of daydream and riff and muse about it."

In the end, Ms. Owens, the artist and the woman, remains out of sight and off the record, leaving her paintings and herself beguilingly -- or frustratingly -- open-ended. It is just this quality that has caused detractors to label her work coy, but it has also attracted her biggest supporters. As one of the latter, Mr. Schimmel, said: "The very things that take our breath away -- her facility, her range, this combination of charm and a kind of toughness -- are the same avenues that people can take toward criticism. But it's harder to attack an art that comes out of the academy in its own time than it is to attack something that's so gregariously ambitious."

Laura Owens

Gavin Brown's Enterprise,

620 Greenwich Street at Leroy Street. Through April 10.

Photos: Recent paintings by Laura Owens at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, above, and in the Whitney Biennial, left. Ms. Owens, who started out doing installation work at CalArts, keeps her methods and her meanings mysterious. (Photographs courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York)