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An Unfettered Palette

With An Astounding Range Of Imagery And Effects, Laura Owens Paints The Joy Of Creation.

April 27, 2004 | By Roni Feinstein Special Correspondent

An unknowing visitor could easily mistake the Laura Owens show at the Museum of Contemporary Art for a group exhibition. From 1997 to 2003, the time span represented by the show, Owens embraced a wide variety of painting styles and subject matter.

Included in the exhibition are grand-scale abstractions, in which collage-like elements and all manner of marks float against and within airy, open fields; flatly painted cityscapes, landscapes and interiors rendered in a blocky, crisp-edged manner; and modestly scaled still life and landscape paintings executed in a tight, linear style that resembles embroidery.

Owens has drawn inspiration from such diverse sources as children's book illustration, Chinese landscape painting, Peruvian and modernist textile design, established masters like Toulouse-Lautrec, Georgia O'Keeffe and Henri Rousseau, the Color Field Painters and others. Her techniques have ranged from spray painting to sponge painting to stain painting, to squeezing raised ropes of paint directly from the tube or laying frothy daubs like cake frosting on her paintings' surfaces.

Owens' best and most successful works -- the ones with which this 33-year-old Los Angeles-based artist is establishing an ever-expanding reputation -- are her fantastical landscape paintings replete with flora and fauna. These paintings, which combine any number of stylistic influences, are rendered in techniques that are mixed, varied and recombined with such complexity and assurance as to offer something uniquely the artist's own. They are so visually rich and stimulating that they have been credited with helping to revitalize the art of painting in our time.

The MoCA installation was designed by Owens in an unusual fashion. Rather than presenting the work chronologically, so that her development unfolds, she scrambled the order of presentation to emphasize the fact that she often worked in several manners simultaneously, and to assert the continuity of certain concerns over time.

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Primary among these concerns has been the desire to address the work directly to the viewer standing before it, with regard to both optical and spatial sensation. Many of her paintings, for example, play with shadows and echoes of form, contrasting raised or otherwise clearly legible elements with others that are barely visible. A number of Owens' works situate the viewer (through implication) within the picture space or lead the eye into the painting's illusionistic depths, in one case through the use of a directional road sign and in another through a series of receding doors.

The full repertoire of Owens' effects is exploited in her glorious and symphonic landscapes with animals, a number of which are represented in the exhibition. Consider Untitled (2001), the final work in the show, in which a moon-faced monkey mother and child are hanging on a branch before a full moon. Above the monkey pair is a spider web; a beaver looks up at them from below. Several bats and tiny bugs further animate the scene, as do a variety of wildflowers and grasses (some of which are all but illegible).

Space in the work is wholly disjunctive and undefined; the tree and patterned hill (or hills?) upon which the monkeys sit appears to be suspended in space. (Notice that the tree seems to be a cutout sheet of paper attached to the canvas.) The eye is led round and about the composition as it follows stalks and branches, and leaps from form to form. Some daubs of paint sitting on the picture surface represent leaves and parts of flowers, while others are simply free-floating marks, delicious bits for the viewer's eye to munch on.

In this and similar works by Owens, while a childlike sense of wonder is evoked by her imagery and subject matter, a more profound sense of wonder is provoked by her range of effects and techniques. The real subject of her paintings is the joy of creation.

Roni Feinstein is a freelance writer based in Boca Raton.

ON VIEW

What: "Laura Owens"

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, 770 NE 125th St., North Miami

When: Through May 9; open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$5; \$3 for seniors and students

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