

An Ecumenical Love of Painting

By **JOÃO RIBAS** | December 14, 2006

<http://www.nysun.com/arts/ecumenical-love-of-painting/45205/>

LAURA OWENS HAS THE DISTINCTION OF HITTING HER STRIDE WHILE ALREADY INFLUENTIAL ON A GENERATION OF painters. The youngest ever surveyed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, just three years ago at age 32, she has received critical acclaim for her eclectic body of work since the mid-1990s.

Throughout this relatively short but meteoric career, Ms. Owens has nearly spanned the breadth the medium affords, from formal aridity to narrative exuberance. Her love of painting seems nothing if not ecumenical.

The new series of untitled paintings on view at Gavin Brown manage to keep a concise pace even while sweeping across her protean range.

The paintings also continue to mine her consummate technique and illustrative clarity, brought to bear on signature faux-naïve imagery. This has included motifs taken from embroidery and textiles, folk art, and Chinese landscape painting, as well as the hints of Matisse in more recent work.

Ms. Owens has combined the compositional rigor of the latter with her own flair for storytelling, where formal brilliance and knowing irony are put to equal use. Her new acrylic and oil on linen paintings add the potent theme of sexual innocence to her by-now expansive repertoire.

The biggest and brightest of the paintings (untitled, like all the works in this show) depicts an idyll of corpulent nudes, cherubs, and smirking lions amid swirling foliage. In a rolling expanse of earth and sky, Ms. Owens paints an antediluvian forest of bright pinks, greens, and purples. This communal, ecstatic nature is created with broad tonal shifts, fauna and flora made from explosions of color delineated by a variety of marks.

The Edenic theme continues in several paintings that follow the temptation and subsequent fall of Adam and Eve. A diptych shows an angelic Adam reaching out, in shocked erotic tension, as Eve holds out a small red apple. Ms. Owens mirrors the composition to give it dramatic flourish, with the viewer's eye sweeping across the leaves that partially obscure the nude figures and catching the eye of jocular animals buried in the scene.

Such compositional balance and formal dexterity run through all of the paintings. Ms. Owens combines marks and applications of paint to imply form and create depth. Each painting mixes the thinnest of washes and stains with broad brushstrokes and impasto made by squeezing paint directly onto the canvas. Some are emphatic in their flatness, others rich with illusionistic space. Outlines and swatches of color are

interspersed with pointillist gestures.

One small painting of a perching bird, its wings outstretched, accumulates an array of short colorful brushstrokes, used to monochromatic effect elsewhere to depict a multi-branched tree. Other small-scale works — including a painting of a prancing doe — mix fuzzy patches of paint with collaged elements and rubbed-in color. Ms. Owens crafts a small still life of flowers from some buttons and a splash of blood red paint; she can just as easily turn random doodles and wood cutouts into a double portrait.

Superbly combined in each painting, this mixture of approaches creates sensuous, layered surfaces. It's this articulated skill, adding complexity to what seem like obvious paintings, that makes them seductive. For all the apparent casualness and whimsy in Ms. Owens's work — often leveled at it pejoratively — it's hard not to get lost in the expressive color and materiality of the paintings.

That's partly lost in the oblique pairing, initiated by Ms. Owens, of the paintings with small copperplate etchings by Jennifer Borstein and concretefilled bluejeans by Rob Pruitt. Both are interesting artists, yet each gains little and neither adds a great deal by their inclusion.

In any case, there is plenty in the paintings to make them inexhaustible, dense as they are with the versatility and ebullience that's secured Ms. Owens's reputation. Cyril Connolly, the English critic, once wrote that "whom the gods wish to destroy they first call promising." In Ms. Owens' case, that sorry fate seems to be entirely avoiding her.

Until January 13 (620 Greenwich St. at Leroy Street, 212-627-5258).
