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Laura Owens, "New Paintings"

An artist eschews the fanciful for the formal with mixed results.

By Time Out editors Mon Nov 9 2009

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Untitled: Photographs: Courtesy the artist/Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Time Out Ratings :

In her latest show, Laura Owens reveals a new preoccupation with the formalist aspect of her work. It's as if she's lost—or has decided to suppress—her girlish, uninhibited inventiveness. While she's still able to dream up unheralded combinations of materials and colors, she seems to have settled into a mood of acquiescence. Gone are the disparate styles and the figurative elements—the fairy-tale characters, quaint animals and amorous couples—that populated her previous paintings. What's left are landscapes, pseudo still lifes and a folksy treatment of the canvas. Owens's fixation with edges and borders, however, produces staid results. She's at her best when she disregards any such constraint and approaches the canvas with gusto and improvisation. She hits her stride with the two biggest paintings here: a dreamlike seascape with waves that rise up into curlicues, and a colorful gestural composition on untreated linen.

In the middle of the gallery, Owens has installed two wooden tables displaying a series of drawing books for visitors to peruse. It's a fun idea, but the artist's decision to have a gallery attendant turn the pages for you hinders the interactive potential of this gesture; most visitors are likely to skip this part or flip through only a few of the books. That's too bad, since the drawings within indicate a looser, more instinctual artist than the one represented by the pieces on the walls.

Even among the latter, though, the loopier compositions elbow out their more contemplative neighbors. A smaller, book-sized piece—rendered on purple paper and showing circuslike shapes sprouting out of a flower's stems—offers proof that Owens still has fanciful inclinations. Here's hoping that she returns to them.—*Nana Asfour*

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